

MEMO

To: Cambridge Community Engagement Team and other interested persons

From: George Putnam, Cambridge Selectboard Member

Date: 4/13/17

Subject: Discussions in other towns

In pursuit of its mission, it might be relevant for the Community Engagement Team to consider if other towns have investigated how to increase participation in their town meetings.

The following reports are included in this file:

- Stowe Town Meeting Task Force – report dated November 7, 2016 (starts on p. 2)
 - News report about the 2017 Stowe town meeting (starts on p. 21)
 - Email chain about how the Stowe TMTF went about their work (starts on p. 30)
- Waitsfield Town Meeting Research Group – report dated December 2014 (starts on p. 34)
- East Montpelier Town Meeting Solutions Committee – undated report but the metadata implies either December 2014 or January 2015 (starts on p. 50)

Each of these reports mentions other towns that have considered these issues and that may warrant further investigation.

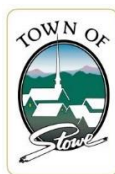
The Stowe and East Montpelier reports refer to the book *All Those In Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community* by Susan Clark and Frank Bryan. This book was published in 2005 by RavenMark and updated in 2015. It is available from the Vermont Institute for Government:

<http://vtinstituteforgovt.weebly.com/all-those-in-favor.html>

While the Waitsfield report does not mention this book, it does mention Middlesex a lot. Susan Clark is the town moderator in Middlesex. Middlesex created a Town Meeting Solutions Committee in 2001 which still meets regularly. Minutes of their meetings since 2012 are online:

<http://middlesexvermont.org/meeting-minutesagendas/town-solutions-committee-meeting-minutes/>

The other co-author of *All Those In Favor* is Frank Bryan, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Vermont. Professor Bryan studied town meetings for over 30 years. He also wrote *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works*, published in 2003 by the University of Chicago Press. This book is quoted in the East Montpelier report.



Stowe Town Meeting Task Force

Findings Report

November 7, 2016

Status: Approved by Town Meeting Task Force

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Town Meeting Task Force purpose: to make recommendations to the Selectboard on ways to improve attendance at Annual Meeting.

Members: Lynn Baumrind, Stew Bouchard, Christine Donovan, Mary Evslin, Lisa Grady, Lisa Hagerty, David Jaqua (Chair), Jed Lipsky, Charles Lusk, Teresa Merelman, Barbara Pfitzenmayer, Ex-Officio Charles Safford, In-Attendance Leighton Detora.

Note: The terms “agenda” and “warning” are synonymous within this report.

I. Summary

The Stowe Selectboard created a Town Meeting Task Force to study the reasons for the decline in voter attendance at the annual town meeting and recommend changes to increase attendance. The Stowe School District conducts its annual meeting on the same date and location in a sequential timeslot.

The Task Force conducted research, undertook community engagement and deliberated internally. The decline in attendance is likely due to a combination of factors including increased population and economic activity, changes in how the town is managed and demographic, social and technological changes.

We conclude there is no single or easy remedy to reverse the decline in attendance at town meeting. However, neglect and business as usual at town meeting would certainly end in its demise.

Therefore, the Task Force recommends that the town attempt to address the attendance decline by trying a variety of approaches over the next three years.

The Task Force recommends the following to the Selectboard:

1. Promote the positive values of town meeting as identified by the Task Force.
2. Use modern communications technology to engage the public regarding town governance and town meeting.
3. Put important and forward-looking issues as articles on the agenda.
4. Create a Town of Stowe User Guide.
5. Create an ongoing entity to promote town meeting.
6. Change the starting time of the March 2017 town meeting agenda to the late afternoon or early evening. A Monday meeting would provide more opportunity to discuss Australian ballot articles than a Tuesday meeting.
7. Add an item under other business to discuss other changes to town meeting.
8. Create a town meeting attendance goal for the next three years.

The Task Force also considered the separate issue of how to increase participation in deciding the town budget. Far more voters participate in local decisions by Australian ballot than by attending town meeting. We studied a novel approach the Town of Charlotte is taking to meet the dual goals of increasing participation on the budget and preserving town meeting.

II. Significance of Town Meeting

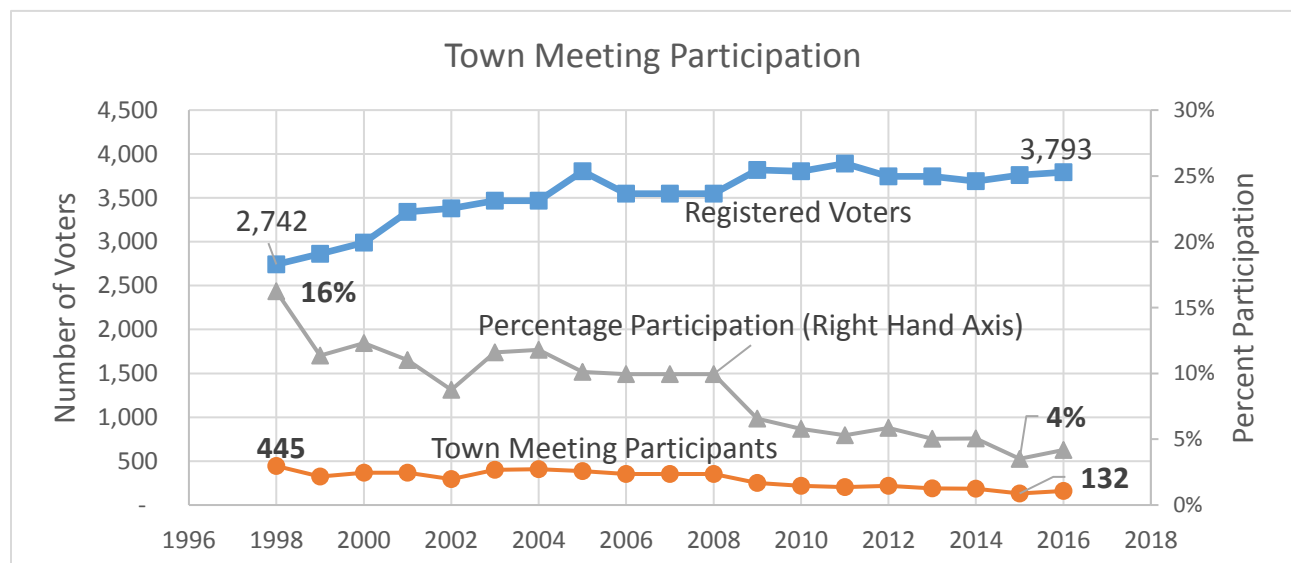
At town meeting the electorate acts as a legislative body to decide certain matters of the town. The matters are expressed as articles on an agenda, officially referred to as the warning. Any registered voter can attend. Each attendee has equal standing. Attendees can ask questions directly to the Selectboard, or to the meeting at large, on any article before the meeting. Attendees can motion to amend articles, and given the will of the attendees, have those amendments go into effect. Town meeting is democracy, direct rule by the people, at the town level. Cleisthenes, the father of Athenian democracy, would be happy.

Task Force members believe town meeting has important values that merit its continuation. These values include the opportunity for attendees to decide the budget, to listen to others and to influence the priorities of the town. Appendix A contains a list of these values.

III. Findings

Attendance at town meeting in many Vermont communities, including Stowe, has declined over the years.

Attendance at Stowe's town meeting averaged 370 during the period of 1998-2008, remaining relatively steady throughout. About 10% of registered voters attended. Since 2009, there has been a steady decline in attendance. Attendance was 132 in 2015 and 159 in 2016, which is 3% and 4% of voters. During this 18-year period, the number of registered voters increased by about 1,000. The following chart illustrates these trends.



In 2016 Stowe conducted an Australian ballot election on the same day as town meeting. The election included ballot items on local issues and a presidential primary. There were 1,944 votes cast, representing 51% of registered voters. The 2015 Australian ballot election, which contained only local issues, had 490 votes cast, representing 13% of registered voters. These totals include early voting. This indicates significantly more Stowe voters choose to participate in local decisions using the ballot box than by attending town meeting.

The decline in attendance at town meeting is not a new phenomenon or concern.

Time was, when nearly every qualified voter took part in a town meeting. Of late years, interest has seemingly declined. As other levels of government have taken over new functions and as the complexity of modern life has increased, people have stayed away from town meeting. Vermont Life, Spring, 1947

Frank Bryan and Susan Clark, authors of **All Those in Favor**, found that attendance at 1,435 town meetings held in 210 towns between 1970 and 1998 averaged 20% of registered voters. An updated estimate by Bryan and Clark is that today 11% attend town meeting statewide. This may be optimistic if Stowe is any measure of trends.

IV. Reasons for decline in attendance

The Task Force researched reasons for the decline in attendance at town meeting.

The reasons cited by Bryan and Clark are threefold:

1. Australian ballot – “In a way, the Australian ballot is worse than deadly, because it doesn’t kill town meeting quickly.”
2. Size of a town’s population – “Town meetings work better, dramatically better, in towns with small populations.” “Analysis shows that increasing town size accounts for much of the decline in attendance at town meeting we have seen since 1970.”
3. Issues matter – When important issues are on the agenda, all other things being equal, attendance increases. Clark and Bryan mention the diminishment of “local control” due to the state’s continued tendency to limit municipal powers.

Reasons cited in other academic research:

4. Social capital - Harvard Kennedy School professor Robert Putnam in his book **Bowling Alone** describes the circumstances behind the decline in civic engagement in recent decades.

Additional reasons identified by the Task Force include:

5. Stowe town government has become more professionally managed than in the past, resulting in certain town meeting articles becoming more routine. For example, the article dealing with vehicle purchases used to present them by line item. Now the article contains an amount to be appropriated to an equipment reserve fund with no mention of individual vehicles. This method may be more efficient. It has led to less discussion. People may conclude that decisions have already been made, so why bother attending.
6. Increase in use of social media and technology that allows people to maintain relationships without meeting in person.
7. Changes in the Stowe Reporter over the past ten years, from being a Stowe-centric journal to being more regionally oriented.

Appendix B contains a list of the reasons for the decline in attendance.

V. Public Engagement

Task Force members engaged with community groups including Stowe Library Board, Stowe Vibrancy, Stowe Area Association, Stowe School Board, Lamoille Board of Realtors and Stowe Rotary to gain insight into how the community values town meeting.

Members of these organizations expressed attitudes about town meeting ranging from highly valuing it, to indifference, and to advocating the Australian ballot to decide the town budget. Some of the younger members of these organizations did not know much or anything about town meeting.

The Task Force undertook an open online public survey to understand community attitudes about town government and town meeting. The survey contained questions with multiple choice responses. Appendix D contains the survey results.

The survey was widely promoted on the town's website, Stowe Reporter, Front Page Forum and fliers distributed throughout town. Of the 224 survey respondents, 199 claimed to be Stowe registered voters and 25 not. Most of those 25 did not fill out the questions, so little can be said for this cohort.

Approximately 160 of the 199 registered voter respondents answered the questions meaningfully. An analysis of the response records and question 7 supports this. One hundred and sixty-one people responded to question 7 asking how often they vote,

with 38 leaving it blank. Questions 14 and 15 were directed towards people who either have or have not regularly attended town meeting. One hundred and fifty-eight people provided responses to either of these questions.

This analysis pertains only to the 161 respondents who claimed they voted sometimes or often on question 7.

Question 13 asked people, if they **regularly** attend town meeting, why they attend. The possible responses were civic duty, to understand the budget, and to find out what others think about town issues among others. Forty-nine people answered the question, which is 30% of the respondents. Seventy percent of the respondents are thus non-regular attendees. These percentages are disproportionate to the actual 3% to 4% of voters who attended town meeting over the past two years when compared to all 3,793 registered voters in Stowe.

- Regular town meeting attendees are 8 times over-represented in the survey.
- Non-attendees are significantly under-represented in the survey.
- The results are not adjusted for this over / under representation.

Question 7 asked how people are engaged with the Town of Stowe and the community. Of respondents who regularly attend town meeting, 100% said they vote often. Attendees are more likely to attend a Selectboard meeting, serve on a town commission and/or be involved with a business organization. Of respondents who do not attend regularly, 86% said they vote often. Non-attendees are more likely to be involved with recreational organizations. Near 100% of both attendees and non-attendees said they regularly read the Stowe Reporter and 90% said they utilize Front Porch Forum (FPF). That FPF is so popular indicates voters are comfortable and interested in receiving community information via email.

Question 8 asked how people feel about town government decisions. Forty-one percent thought the Selectboard made well informed decisions. This percentage was the same for regular attendees and non-attendees. Eighteen percent overall thought the Selectboard “did not reach out enough” when making decisions, with 30% for attendees and 16% for non-attendees respectively. Twenty-seven percent overall indicated they did not know how decisions are made, with 15% for attendees and 30% for non-attendees respectively. Attendees are on average more educated about how town government works and are more skeptical about how decisions are made.

Questions 10, 11 and 12 were designed to assess how informed people are about local governance and opportunities to participate in it. The responses indicate that 60% to 70% are well informed and 30% to 40% require some additional education.

Question 14 asked people, if they **do not** attend town meeting, why. One hundred and nine people answered the question. The most common response, at 56%, was that they could not take time off from work. The next most common response, at 30%, was that they do not like listening to other people go on and on. Child care is an issue for some. Transportation was not an issue. A variety of other reasons are cited in the responses and open ended comments.

Question 15 asked what would encourage people to attend town meeting. Finding creative ways to inform people about the issues in advance of the meeting had the largest response at 38%, with 27% for attendees and 41% for non-attendees. Holding the meeting on an evening had the next largest response at 33%, with little variation between attendees and non-attendees. There was some interest, at 25%, in moving the meeting to a Saturday day.

Several of the possible responses for question 15 dealt with structural changes to how voters decide the town and school budgets. One response was for town meeting to consist only of a very good discussion of issues followed by an Australian ballot vote for the budget. A significant number of people, at 31%, felt this was a good idea, with 24% for attendees and 36% for non-attendees. There was less support for moving the school budget back to town meeting at 22%.

VI. Discussion and Remedies

The committee researched and discussed possible remedies to address the decline in attendance at town meeting.

The Task Force reviewed the efforts in recent years by the towns of Bethel, Charlotte, East Montpelier, Middlesex and Waitsfield. Each of these communities has experienced a decline in town meeting attendance, established a committee to research the underlying issues and produced a report containing analysis and recommendations. A conclusion in many of the reports is that there is no single easy solution to address the decline. They are experimenting with various changes such as improving logistics, changing the date and time of the meeting and promotion. Bryan and Clark in their book suggest many remedies.

The Stowe survey found that 56% of non-attendees stated they could not attend town meeting due to work commitments. Changing the meeting date to a weekend and / or the time to the late afternoon or early evening could remedy this for some. Having the budget take vote take place at a time certain is another possibility. Research by Bryan and Clark suggest that such changes alone do not lead to a significant increase in attendance.

Appendix C contains remedies attributed to various sources.

VII. Recommendations for Increasing Attendance

Town Meeting Task Force recommends the following remedies to the decline in attendance at Town meeting. A list of all remedies identified and discussed by the committee is in Appendix C.

1. Promote the positive values of town meeting as identified by the Task Force.
2. Use technology such as email and the town's website to engage the public.
 - a. An engagement study conducted by school board members indicates parents prefer receiving information from the board via email.
 - b. The popularity of Front Porch Forum indicates that community members value regular correspondence containing community information via email.
3. Put important forward looking issues as advisory articles on the agenda and promote discussion of them in advance of town meeting.
 - a. Engage community members about goals and priorities.
 - b. Encourage the Stowe Reporter to cover town government issues.
4. Create a Town of Stowe User Guide that contains useful information of the workings of town government and town meeting.
 - a. Distribute to all residents and property owners.
 - b. Make available online.
 - c. Make available to newly registered voters and new property owners.
5. Create an ongoing entity to promote town meeting.
 - a. Many towns have created ongoing Town Meeting Solutions Committees.
6. Change the start time of the March 2017 meeting to the late afternoon or early evening. Meeting on Tuesday late afternoon or early evening would provide only a limited opportunity to discuss Australian ballot articles as voting closes at 7 PM. A Monday meeting would provide more opportunity to discuss Australian ballot articles.

7. Put on an item on the upcoming March 2017 town meeting warning to discuss changes to town meeting.

VIII. Increasing Voter Participation on Deciding the Budget

One issue that deserves attention, but was not included in the Task Force's purpose, is the disparity between Australian ballot participation and town meeting attendance. The requirement that voters be present during the meeting to participate in the decisions of the meeting is a significant barrier. This issue was explored in question 15 of the public survey. Thirty-six percent of non-attendees preferred to vote on the budget via Australian ballot. Over 10 times as many voters participated in the most recent town meeting day Australian ballot election than attended town meeting.

Many towns in Vermont have addressed the decline in town meeting attendance by moving the budget vote to Australian ballot on town meeting day. Bryan and Clark emphatically state that this approach leads to the rapid death of town meeting.

The Town of Charlotte recently adopted a methodology to enable greater participation in deciding the budget while maintaining town meeting. It deserves consideration.

Starting in 2012 a self-formed group in Charlotte began studying the decline in attendance at their town meeting. At the outset, they defined their goal differently than how the Stowe Selectboard defined the Task Force's purpose.

Charlotte Goal: Increase voter participation on the town budget while maintaining town meeting.

The group concluded that it was unlikely, given the various demographic, cultural and technological changes, to increase attendance at town meeting via various changes such as promotion, meeting format, changing dates and times etc. These changes at best might shift the mix of attendees, but not the total number in any significant way.

Their proposal is as follows. The Selectboard develops a budget under its normal process and presents it as a warned article at town meeting on the usual date. At the meeting, the budget amount is established through the normal process. All articles involving expenditures are handled similarly. These amounts are then warned for an Australian ballot vote that takes place six or so weeks later. Non-budgetary articles at town meeting are unaffected. Other articles that are normally voted via Australian ballot on town meeting day, such as Selectboard and School Board members, school budget, are unaffected.

The cost of this approach is a second election, sometime in mid-April. The participation in that election will likely be different, probably lower, than the town meeting day election. It does provide voters with a greater opportunity to participate in deciding the budget than does town meeting.

It was later learned that some towns in New Hampshire use a similar approach.

It took Charlotte three years to have this process established in law. They consulted with VLCT and the Sec. of State's office, vetting the scheme's constitutionality and consistency with election statutes. Their Selectboard, town voters and the Vermont legislature approved a charter change for Charlotte to put this method into effect. To accommodate the reluctance of certain Selectboard members, the charter change has a three-year sunset provision. Voting on the town budget will return to town meeting after three years unless a permanent charter change is established.

It is uncertain how this method of approving the town budget will affect attendance at town meeting. One could argue that it will lead to a decrease in attendance because the importance of the town budget vote at town meeting has been diminished. This is consistent with the research finding that the reduced importance of articles decided at town meeting leads to a decline in attendance.

Recommendations for Increasing Voter Participation on Deciding the Budget

1. Establish a three-year town meeting attendance goal. If the goal is not met after 3 years, consider:
 - a. Moving the budget vote to Australian ballot on town meeting day.
 - b. Adopting the town budget wherein town meeting determines the budget amount to be warned for an Australian ballot approximately 6 weeks later.

IX. Appendices

Appendix A. Town Meeting values

List of values of town meeting identified by Town Meeting Task Force.

1. Understand the budget, taxes, where the money is going
2. Listen to and interact with community leaders and meeting participants, an annual “homecoming” for engaged citizens
3. Discussion, debate and voting on discretionary items, such as community services and studies to be conducted by the Town, are expressions of community values and preferences
4. Discussion on issues and topics important to the town at a widely-attended meeting
5. Opportunity to influence Selectboard and Town Manager in the presence of many peers at the Town’s Meeting as opposed to a Selectboard meeting
6. Gain perspective and feelings of other people
7. Opportunity to express thoughts on budgetary line items
8. Opportunity to make a difference
9. Fosters idea of ownership of decisions
10. Attendance and participation fosters responsibilities of and enlarges the idea citizenship
11. Opportunity to speak, and be heard by large audience
12. Participation of the electorate is ultimate check of a democracy
13. Attendance, participation, watchfulness, and engagement create context for ethical and responsive government
14. Attendance and participation leads to both a stronger community and stronger sense of community
15. Opportunity for Selectboard and Town Manager to gauge town’s people at the town’s people’s meeting, are they happy?

Appendix B. Reasons why people do not attend town meeting

List of reasons why people do not attend town meeting identified by the Town Meeting Task Force, based on Task Force member observations and opinions.

1. School property tax is much higher than town property tax, so why bother
2. Work commitments
3. Snow birds
4. Tuesday ski bum race
5. Australian ballot for other items
6. School vacation
7. Transportation
8. Big issues are behind the town
9. Changing social fabric
10. Changing social media, email, social media
11. New comers are not as indoctrinated in traditional Vermont values
12. No passion, nothing is on the line
13. People generally less engaged with local issues
14. Lack of childcare
15. Town is well run by the Town Manager, so, town meeting is boring, even for those interested in participating
16. Everything is so complex for some people, so it does not matter to attend
17. People don't need to know more, they are disengaged
18. People don't feel informed enough to meaningfully engage
19. Apathy, attendance won't make a difference
20. Commuter town
21. Some people are intimidated in speaking in public
22. Some people consider it to be a hostile environment

Appendix C. Possible remedies to the decline in Town Meeting attendance

A. Town Meeting Task Force

Remedies identified by Town Meeting Task Force on September 26, 2016.

1. Promote the importance of town meeting to the community based upon the values identified by the Task Force
2. Write articles about the history of town meeting
3. Make town meeting more interesting by:
 - a. Electing the Selectboard and Listers at the meeting
 - b. Put interesting forward looking items on the agenda
4. Improve messaging by using social media, Front Page Forum, town's website, email
5. Utilize creative approaches to marketing
6. Employ focus groups to better understand community values and attitudes; use information to create strategies to improve attendance
7. Ask town bodies to bring forth issues that could be discussed at town meeting during other business
8. Change the date and time of the meeting
9. Change the venue
10. Change the agenda / schedule / format of the meeting
11. Separate town and school meetings
12. Create a permanent town meeting outreach and advocacy committee
13. Simplify the Annual Town Report by separating out the financial accounting statements. Make the report easier to read
14. Ask businesses to encourage employees to attend and provide time off for them to do so

B. All Those in Favor by Frank Bryan & Susan Clark

Chapter 11 - Things You Can Do **Now** to Improve Your Town Meeting

1. Highlight the issues
 - a. Hot issues are one of the most important reasons people attend
 - b. Structure of warning – articles
2. Arrange for child care at Town meeting
3. Skip the microphones if possible
4. Enjoy food together

5. Build an agenda that encourages attendance and participation throughout
 - a. Agendas create the rhythm of the meeting
6. Help make an excellent town report
7. Publicize, publicize, publicize
8. Include elements of celebration
9. Say “thank you”
 - a. Briefly recognize outstanding, exceptional contributions
10. It takes a team to make a great town meeting
11. Encourage new participation
12. Explain the rules
13. Host living room meetings
14. Make the room welcoming
15. Highlight the work of the year
16. Transportation – Offer rides to town meeting
17. Graduate voters – Voter oath at graduation

Chapter 12 - Things You Can Do Over Time to Improve Your Town Meeting

1. Use the Australian ballot as little as possible
2. Help make town meeting a real democracy holiday
 - a. Recognize businesses that encourage employees to attend
3. Combine School and Town meeting
4. Be an advocate for creative localism
5. Recognize the impact of population on local democracy
6. No matter what your town’s size, cultivate small town advantages
 - a. Small towns get better per capita participation
 - b. Larger towns can take steps to make their towns feel smaller
 - c. Spread the word
 - d. Foster local democracy
7. Involve youth in town meeting
8. Create a “Democracy Matters” committee in your town
 - a. Could work outside government in watchdog capacity
 - b. Could be institutionalized
9. Be prepared
 - a. Leaders be prepared for town meeting
 - b. But not too prepared – No Power Point

- c. Citizens be prepared
 - d. Listen to others
10. Resist temptation to delegate
- a. Don't appoint committee to do the work that has in the past been done by town meeting participants

C. Citation from the East Montpelier Town Meeting Solutions Committee, 2014

Many suggestions have been made to the committee and options explained in the books we have read about things the town could do to increase accessibility and participation. They include changing the venue to a larger space to accommodate more people, changing to an evening meeting, moving the meeting to a weekend, having separate meetings for the school and the town, and Australian ballot. Research by Frank Bryan looking at decades of data shows that none of these remedies increase attendance. We have also discussed technological assistance for remote participation, which did not exist at the time Bryan's book was published.

D. Citation from the Waitsfield Town Meeting Solutions Committee, 2014
Recommendations

Near Term - approach:

Tinker! The Town Meeting Research Group enthusiastically encourages the Waitsfield Select Board to take a 3 to 5-year approach to trying some new ideas and seeing if participation at Town Meeting increases. And then trying other ideas after that and seeing what changes occur.

Near Term - structure changes:

- 1) To reduce disruption of the town meeting the Town Meeting Research Group recommends separating the Town Meeting from the School Board Meeting and moving the School Board Meeting to a different date or time; consider holding the school meeting the night before or on some other date.
- 2) Move Town Meeting to a late afternoon start: 4pm or later with a hard stop at 9pm. (Meeting could overflow into the next night if required).
- 3) Pre-announce that the vote for the town budget will occur at a specific time, such as 6:00 or 6:30pm (depending on when Town Meeting starts).
- 4) Create a volunteer pick-up / return home rides service for those interested.

Near Term - information sharing strategy changes:

1) As a compliment to the existing Town Report, create the following printed materials

a. Executive summary of budget, issues for discussion

b. Budget and Tax impact of major / warned items (see examples in appendix from Middlesex, VT town).

c. Pie chart of sources [in one pie chart] and uses [in one pie chart] of town budget (see examples in appendix from Middlesex, Vermont).

d. Find a way to highlight large and/or potentially controversial items in the printed reports.

2) Distribute these materials in mailed town reports.

3) Have copies of these materials on chairs at town meeting.

4) Place information on town website

5) Encourage media coverage of same materials in advance of the Town Meeting day.

Longer Term:

1) Investigate and test various technologies such as email / text / phone response system to engage voters year around regardless of whether Town Meeting or Australian ballot is used.

2) Floor amendments on financial / budget items only considered at earlier scheduled (Jan/Feb) budget meetings.

3) Floor amendments on non-financial but policy matters reflecting sense of community are non-binding but must be reviewed and reported on no later than next annual Town Meeting.

4) Consider capping the amounts permitted in floor amendments by either a percent or by an absolute value of the original article.

5) Run a survey (yet to be developed) to all residents to quantify residents who can't attend Town Meeting because of infirmity, military service, work, children, other. Measure quantity and type of reasons for non-attendance. Run this survey in three different channels:

a. Before town meeting day via snail mail and/or email.

b. During voting hours of town meeting day

c. At Town Meeting itself

6) Run a survey (yet to be developed) to all residents asking whether they would support a special Town Meeting day – to be held during summer months – to determine if voters prefer Australian ballot over Town Meeting Day. Run this survey in three different channels:

a. Before Town Meeting Day via snail mail and/or email.

b. During voting hours of Town Meeting Day

c. At Town Meeting itself

Appendix D. Survey Results

Appendix E. References

All Those in Favor by Frank Bryan and Susan Clark, published by RavenMark, Inc.

A Citizens Guide to Vermont Town Meeting, Office of the Vermont Secretary of State, 2008

Town Meeting Day, A Vermont Tradition, Deborah L. Markowitz, Vermont Secretary of State and Kids Voting Vermont, 2003

Town Reports

Bethel Town Meeting Solutions Committee – Minutes

Charlotte Town Meeting Solutions Committee – Website

East Montpelier Town Meeting Solutions Committee – Report

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee – Discussions with Susan Clark

Waitsfield Town Meeting Study Group – Report

Election Data

Office of the Stowe Town Clerk

http://www.stowetoday.com/stowe_reporter/news/local_news/nichols-beats-shiner-voter-turnout-praised/article_deb1a93c-04f6-11e7-9ebb-63427c56e7c4.html

Town Meeting Day 2017: Stowe

Nichols beats Shiner; voter turnout praised

Residents dig into budget details

By Caleigh Cross | Stowe Reporter Mar 9, 2017



Photo by Gordon Miller

Three Stowe Select Board members adopt the glasses-on-head listening posture — from left, Adam Davis, Willie Noyes Hagerty.

What a difference a day makes. Town officials have been wringing their hands about spotty town meeting attendance, and even formed a task force to study how to resurrect Vermont's democratic institution.

Then came Tuesday.

"Town meeting is alive and well in Stowe," observed Willie Noyes, chair of the Stowe Select Board.

Noyes and the rest of the select board were looking out at about 250 Stowe residents who'd trekked into the Stowe High School auditorium by 8 a.m. and didn't shuffle out until six hours later, except for a half-hour lunch.

Even so, residents voted 977-152 to change the town charter, allowing the annual town meeting to be held on any of the three days before the traditional date of the first Tuesday in March. The task force thought a little flexibility in the town meeting date might help boost voters attendance.

Nichols beats Shiner

In town elections, Morgan Nichols won a two-year term on the select board, beating Jacqueline "Jacque" Shiner 646-485. Nichols will replace Adam Davis, who did not seek re-election.

"I want to thank the community for its amazing support," Nichols said. "I am deeply humbled and honored to have been elected and I'm thrilled at the opportunity to serve the town of Stowe. I want to congratulate Jacque for running a solid campaign and her past service. I look forward to getting to work on matters important to our future."

Shiner was cheerful Wednesday morning.

"I want to thank Adam Davis for his confidence in asking me to run, and for his position," Shiner said. "I also want to thank my supporters and those who voted for me. I wish Morgan well in her new position on the select board."

- Willie Noyes, the current select board chair, was unopposed for a three-year term.
- Leighton Detora was unopposed for re-election as town and school moderator. Leo Clark was elected to a three-year term as a town lister.
- An \$800,000 bond to allow the Stowe Electric Department to invest in infrastructure and improve its billing system was approved 909-219.

- Another electric department bond for \$1,225,000 passed 719-354. The money will purchase equity that Stowe Electric believes will provide a return on investment that will lower rates over time. The bonds will be financed from electric department revenues, not taxes, and won't affect electric rates.

Budget discussion

Voters dug into the \$11,617,079 municipal budget proposal.

- Major questions were raised about a \$20,000 donation requested by the Stowe Area Association — its first-ever request for town assistance.

Larry Lackey said the destination marketing organization has been “tremendously successful in promoting Stowe’s businesses, but I question the need for this appropriation. They’re a tourism marketing organization, and the town supports tourism and these businesses in so many ways already.”

Lackey moved to remove what he called an “inappropriate appropriation” from the budget.

“This is a slippery slope,” agreed Arnie Ziegel, who’s on the Stowe Planning Commission. “Stowe Area Association, for all the good it does, is a member-driven organization. If the town is going to invest in economic development, it should be under the auspices of the Stowe town government, not Stowe Area Association.”

Stowe Area Association’s supporters bristled.

“I benefit in this town, as a resident and as a business owner, from Stowe Area,” said George Lewis, who owns the Brass Lantern Inn and is on the Stowe Area Association’s board. “Stowe Area Association is marketing this town. ... It’s created the opportunity for businesses to be here. My property value and probably a lot of people’s here benefits from Stowe Area Association.”

“Stowe Area Association is very important to this town as a marketing organization,” said select board member Lisa Hagerty. “We don’t have a chamber of commerce. The entire town benefits from our capital budget, which comes from the local option tax.”

The option tax, a 1 percent tax on meals and rooms, is funneled directly into the capital fund; \$350,000 every year goes to pay off the loan that financed Stowe Arena, and the rest is for one-time projects that cost more than \$10,000.

It stands to reason that the more tourists who come to Stowe and stay and eat, the flusher the capital fund.

Tom Barnes, president of Stowe Vibrancy, pointed out that plenty of nonmember businesses also benefit when the Stowe Area Association draws people to town.

"Many towns support destination marketing organizations," said Patti Clark, innkeeper at the Green Mountain Inn. "This is not an unusual request."

Voters opted to keep the Stowe Area Association donation in the budget.

- A \$3,000 donation won't be made to Maple Leaf Farm, a residential addiction treatment center in Underhill that closed down last month, so the question Tuesday was what to do with that money.

Teresa Merelman wanted to deduct that \$3,000 from the budget, lowering the total to \$11,614,079.

Town Manager Charles Safford said that, unless the money is deducted, it will "just sit in the budget" until voters allocate it for something else.

Other residents wanted to put that money to use, such as Lisa Senecal, who suggested a similar organization could get it.

Suggestions for what to do with the \$3,000 included donating it to other organizations, such as the Children's Room, Helen Day Art Center or Alcoholics Anonymous.

"I'm sure there are plenty of people who could use the \$3,000," Marina Meerburg said. "It won't make a difference in our pockets."

"I'd like to reappoint the funds," agreed Barbara Baraw.

Voters decided to leave the \$3,000 in the budget until they find some other use for it.

- Residents wanted to know why the Stowe Arena budget is \$504,957.

Voters' expectations for the Stowe Arena — that it would benefit the town financially to have a new ice rink — haven't happened, and the feeling now is one of wanting to minimize losses.

The four-year-old rink just incurred \$30,000 in unexpected repair expenses, and lost \$18,000 in expected revenue.

"It's park and rec's responsibility to market the arena," said Matt Frazee, director of the Stowe Parks and Recreation Department, and it's working with the Stowe Area Association to market the rink.

"I do believe there is hope to close the only gap we can close," said Hagerty, who championed the rink when it was proposed. "That's the operating budget. The debt doesn't go away."

- The town budget passed as presented, at \$11,617,079, without further debate.
- Voters rejected a \$109,000 shelter at the Polo Fields, a proposal that dates back a decade. The shelter would have given athletes a place to go in a rainstorm or thunderstorm, and also provided some storage space for athletic equipment.

Concerns sprang from perceptions that the proposed 1,500-square-foot shelter had morphed from a shelter for kids playing soccer into a storage unit for athletic equipment with an open, roofed space.

Voters worried whether the shelter would actually offer lightning protection, and some took issue with the open structure, but a closed shelter would have cost more, said Adam Davis, a selectman.

"If we closed it, we'd have to put in power," Davis said. "We tried our best to minimize the price by taking out the walls."

Stowe voters weren't convinced.

"Safety-wise, it's a bad idea," said Lionel Fay. "Lightning does funny things."

One woman who didn't give her name expressed concern that "10 kids could be killed at once from one lightning strike" if they were all huddled under the shelter during a storm.

"The chances are very real that someone could get hurt," John Black said. "We're talking millions of volts."

Black said kids might just be safer standing in the field with no shelter.

The proposed shelter was "not intended to be a force field to protect youth from all things," Safford said.

- Voters approved a \$470,000 local contribution to a federally funded sidewalk expansion throughout the lower village, which will include reworking the River Road intersection and removing the utility pole that now sits at the junction with South Main Street.

- Voters approved spending \$40,000 to restore the windows in the town-owned Vermont Ski and Snowboard Museum.

The other business

In the open-ended "other business" category, when residents can bring up anything on their minds, poor internet and cellphone service in parts of town was acknowledged by all present, although nobody proposed any action.

Parking "continues to get worse," Merelman said.

Voters batted around the idea of a public forum to discuss citizens' thoughts about Vail Resorts buying Stowe Mountain Resort's ski operations, but nobody bit.

Cathy Davis, a Stowe Elementary School teacher, urged more people to attend Stowe

School Board and Stowe Select Board meetings.

"It's important that we're here, but it's also important that we're there," Davis said.

"It's almost a slap in the face to pick their work apart line by line" when attendance is low at meetings where the work is being done to construct budgets.

A nonbinding motion by Tom Evslin to decrease the Stowe Arena budget by revenue deficits of the previous year was shot down with a resounding "Nay."

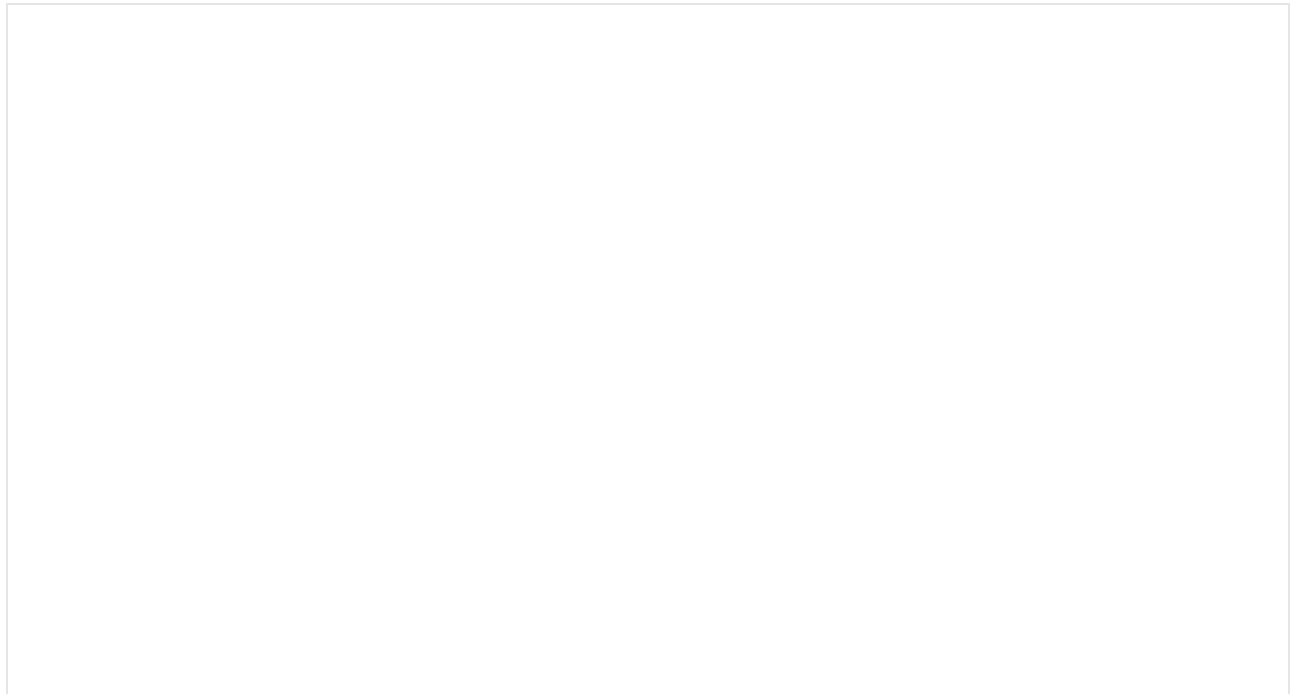
Voter turnout

Moderator Leighton Detora smiled when asked his thoughts on turnout this year.

"Discussions have been spirited, the turnout is great. What do you want me to say? I'm glad," Detora said. "You always do better when you're invested in the process, rather than getting through it because you live here."

Mary Evslin commended folks for coming out. This year's town meeting drew about 100 more people than last year.

Lisa Hagerty suggested looking into Facebook live-streaming the town meeting next year to increase engagement opportunities.





Stowe Town Meeting 2017
Video and Photos by Kristen Braley Mar 9, 2017

MORE INFORMATION



Respectfully, Nichols, Shiner outline their differences

🎥 57:20 Stowe Select Board debate 2017

Stowe's annual town meeting: Here's what to expect

Town meeting task force has ideas to boost attendance

Saving a town tradition

Donza, Brochhausen, Rosenbaum win school board seats

📷 +31 Town Meeting 2017

Five honored at Stowe's town meeting

Ballot issues cast a shadow

What candidates spent in campaigns for local offices

In survey, voters want village parking, sidewalks

Caleigh Cross



George Putnam

From: David Jaqua <davidjaqua@myfairpoint.net>
Sent: Saturday, April 1, 2017 8:47 AM
To: 'George Putnam'
Subject: RE: Questions about your Town Meeting Task Force

Hi George,

Here is a rough outline of the process we followed.

1. Organize committee – Set Goals – Increase participation etc – one meeting
2. Research – Trends, other community reports, articles, Bryan book etc.
3. Discussion of what committee members themselves value about town meeting / local governance – two meetings
4. Discussion of what committee members believe about public perceptions of town meeting – why others do not participate – one meeting – Do not share this with public.
5. Outreach to community – articles in paper, invitation to small participatory forums
6. Design, implement evaluate community values survey – three meetings – Survey Monkey – Promote using paper, fliers, Front Porch Forum (very effective)
7. I personally met with seven community groups to build awareness
8. Begin to draft conclusions / recommendations
9. Write report
10. Present to Selectboard and community

We did get a lot of coverage in our local paper.

Good luck,

David

From: George Putnam [mailto:gspuam@gmail.com]
Sent: Friday, March 31, 2017 5:45 PM
To: 'Lisa Hagerty' <lisahagerty@me.com>
Cc: 'Leighton Detora' <leightondetora@outlook.com>; 'David Jaqua' <davidjaqua@myfairpoint.net>
Subject: RE: Questions about your Town Meeting Task Force

Thank you, all of you, for your prompt and helpful responses! Lisa – David said that, yes, you followed the open meeting law. David – thank you for the phone conversation and the documents that you emailed me. Leighton – thank you for the switchel recipe!

(David and Lisa, if you haven't tried switchel, I highly recommend it. I'm sure Leighton agrees. If you don't want to make your own, you can buy premade stuff from the [Vermont Switchel Company](#) of Hardwick or [Up Mountain Switchel](#) of Londonderry.)

Congratulations on what you accomplished with your task force. I wish you continued success with participation in your town meeting. It is very helpful to know the process you went through last year, and what you accomplished. As we get our committee off the ground shortly, we may reach out to you for more discussions.

Thanks again. Have a great weekend.

George
switchelphilosopher.blog

From: Lisa Hagerty [<mailto:lisahagerty@me.com>]
Sent: Friday, March 31, 2017 4:06 PM
To: George Putnam <gspurnam@gmail.com>
Cc: Leighton Detora <leightondetora@outlook.com>; David Jaqua <davidjaqua@myfairpoint.net>
Subject: Re: Questions about your Town Meeting Task Force

Hi George,

I'd be happy to discuss - but I'm not the best when it comes to "rules of engagement". I let better institutional minds than mine help me comply with those!

David, we operated as a task force sanctioned by the SB and therefore we had to comply with open meeting requirements? Is that right? How did that apply to our focus groups etc.? Or perhaps I have this wrong - and it was exactly the opposite!!

As far as my participation went - this task force was something I felt strongly about and wanted to lend my energy and passion to the work.

As for the uptick in attendance? I think it was a combination of several things - some global - some local:

1. The task force itself and the news on it brought attention to Town Meeting as a concept throughout the year and I saw that our regular meetings were a little more lively and well-attended.
2. The national political scene has increased the level of local engagement. People learned the hard way what happens when they don't participate - when people don't get out and vote. Bernie's parting challenge was for young people to get engaged and to begin with their local issues.
3. We had some issues for Floor Vote that people were interested in - An Economic Development appropriation, a undesignated capital fund surplus appropriation on the school board side and another community capital project that people were a bit polarized on. These bring out attendance.
4. We also had several hotly contested local board positions that brought people out.

The morning was long and while we had 250 for the first 4 hours - we had less than half that number for the afternoon session which had an important capital project vote in it. It was disappointing to see so many people fail to come back for the afternoon session.

Overall, I was thrilled with the outcome for the first year - and believe that our work lent energy to the topic and certainly had some impact on attendance. We have more work to do - and again, keeping energy focused on Town Meeting will continue to keep it one people's busy radars.

I hope this helps and I'd be happy to discuss any further questions.

All the best and good luck with the project.

Lisa Hagerty
2850 Mountain Road

Stowe, VT 05672
LisaHagerty@Me.com
508.560.3523

On Mar 31, 2017, at 3:37 PM, George Putnam <gspudnam@gmail.com> wrote:

Yes, absolutely!

George
switchelphilosopher.blog

From: Leighton Detora [<mailto:leightondetora@outlook.com>]
Sent: Friday, March 31, 2017 2:59 PM
To: George Putnam <gspudnam@gmail.com>; davidjaqua@myfairpoint.net; lisahagerty@me.com
Subject: RE: Questions about your Town Meeting Task Force

George, are you a switchel fan?

From: George Putnam [<mailto:gspudnam@gmail.com>]
Sent: Friday, March 31, 2017 2:51 PM
To: davidjaqua@myfairpoint.net; lisahagerty@me.com; leightondetora@outlook.com
Subject: Questions about your Town Meeting Task Force

To: David Jaqua, Lisa Hagerty, Leighton Detora

I am a new member of the selectboard in Cambridge. We are in the process of forming a committee to look at ways of increasing citizen satisfaction with town meeting, similar to the Town Meeting Task Force that you formed a year ago.

Charles Safford, your town manager, gave me your email addresses when I asked him about what Stowe did last year. Charles also shared with me the one-page "charge" that he wrote for the task force.

I am curious to know if you have any thoughts that you wish to share about how you went about your process, what you learned, if there is anything you would do differently if you were to do it again, etc. In particular, I am interested to know if you considered the task force to be subject to open meeting laws, and I am interested in how you would describe the relationship between the selectboard and the task force. Our selectboard is going to assign one selectperson to our committee and that will be me. This is a topic that I am interested in. So, Lisa, I am particularly interested in your perspective.

I have read your report, which is nicely done, and I blogged about it here:

<https://switchelphilosopher.blog/2017/03/26/town-meeting-thoughts/>

It seems like your task force led to good results for Stowe, and I hope for similarly good results for Cambridge. If you have any advice for us as we embark on this process, I would welcome your thoughts.

Best regards,

George Putnam
Cambridge Selectboard Member

gsputnam@gmail.com

802-644-5717 home

802-309-7598 cell

Waitsfield Town Meeting Research Group
How to Improve Town Meeting Day Participation
December 2014

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Introduction

Purpose / Inquiry

Town Meeting attendance and voter participation have been in a decline for a very long time. The reasons for this are various and generally understood and agreed upon. The Waitsfield, Vermont Select Board has asked a group of residents to volunteer to propose to the Select Board how the town might increase active participation in decisions that impact the future of the town?

Mission Statement / Scope

Opportunity & Participation: The Town Meeting Research Group will offer to the Waitsfield Select Board ideas to increase the opportunity and encourage greater participation at Town Meeting and/or in town decisions.

Recommendations

Near Term - approach:

- Tinker! The Town Meeting Research Group enthusiastically encourages the Waitsfield Select Board to take a 3-5 year approach to trying some new ideas and seeing if participation at Town Meeting increases. And then trying other ideas after that and seeing what changes occur.

Near Term - structure changes:

- 1) To reduce disruption of the town meeting the Town Meeting Research Group recommends separating the Town Meeting from the School Board Meeting and moving the School Board Meeting to a different date or time; consider holding the school meeting the night before or on some other date.
- 2) Move Town Meeting to a late afternoon start: 4pm or later with a hard stop at 9pm. (Meeting could overflow into the next night if required).
- 3) Pre-announce that the vote for the town budget will occur at a specific time, such as 6:00 or 6:30pm (depending on when Town Meeting starts).
- 4) Create a volunteer pick-up / return home rides service for those interested.

Near Term - information sharing strategy changes:

- 1) As a compliment to the existing Town Report, create the following printed materials
 - a. Executive summary of budget, issues for discussion
 - b. Budget and Tax impact of major / warned items (see examples in appendix from Middlesex, VT town).
 - c. Pie chart of sources [in one pie chart] and uses [in one pie chart] of town budget (see examples in appendix from Middlesex, Vermont).
 - d. Find a way to highlight large and/or potentially controversial items in the printed reports.
- 2) Distribute these materials in mailed town reports.
- 3) Have copies of these materials on chairs at town meeting.
- 4) Place information on town website
- 5) Encourage media coverage of same materials in advance of the Town Meeting day.

Longer Term:

- 1) Investigate and test various technologies such as email / text / phone response system to engage voters year round regardless of whether Town Meeting or Australian ballot is used.
- 2) Floor amendments on financial / budget items only considered at earlier scheduled (Jan/Feb) budget meetings.
- 3) Floor amendments on non-financial but policy matters reflecting sense of community are non-binding but must be reviewed and reported on no later than next annual Town Meeting.
- 4) Consider capping the amounts permitted in floor amendments by either a percent or by an absolute value of the original article.
- 5) Run a survey (yet to be developed) to all residents to quantify residents who can't attend Town Meeting because of infirmity, military service, work, children, other. Measure quantity and type of reasons for non-attendance. Run this survey in three different channels:
 - a. Before town meeting day via snail mail and/or email.
 - b. During voting hours of town meeting day
 - c. At Town Meeting itself

- 6) Run a survey (yet to be developed) to all residents asking whether they would support a special Town Meeting day – to be held during summer months – for the purpose of determining if the majority of the residents would prefer Australian ballot over Town Meeting Day. Run this survey in three different channels:
 - a. Before Town Meeting Day via snail mail and/or email.
 - b. During voting hours of Town Meeting Day
 - c. At Town Meeting itself

Committee Work

Brief Reflection - Participation Today

For all towns wrestling with lower Town Meeting Day participation, possible solutions often alternate between making changes to the Town Meeting Day itself and moving to Australian ballot. The research the Town Meeting Research Group has conducted thus far shows mixed and non-lasting results for towns that have moved to Australian ballot.

For example, Peacham, Vermont achieved 40% Australian ballot voter participation when they first moved to Australian ballot; however, this participation rate dropped over time and fell roughly in line with previous Town Meeting participation rates. Research shows that when a town moves the budget to Australian ballot, participation at Town Meeting erodes over time.

In a scan of Waitsfield participation from 2008 to 2014, the highest Town Meeting attendance was 14% of registered voters when the town voted for a new water system. The lowest Waitsfield Town Meeting attendance rate was 6%. Waitsfield's Town Meeting attendance rates are in line with the typical range of 6-14% in Vermont.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Minutes- # Estimated at TM</u>	<u>Minutes- #counted via Floor Votes</u>	<u>% of Voter Checklist at TM</u>	<u># Australia n Ballot Voters</u>	<u>% of Voter Checklist that Voted</u>	<u># Absentee Voters</u>	<u># on Voter Checklist</u>
<u>2014</u>	<u>85</u>	<u>159</u>	<u>11%</u>	<u>527</u>	<u>36.9%</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>1429</u>
<u>2013</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>161</u>	<u>11%</u>	<u>588</u>	<u>40.6%</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>1488</u>
<u>2012</u>	<u>125</u>	<u>NA</u>	<u>9%</u>	<u>493</u>	<u>34.5%</u>		<u>1415</u>
<u>2011</u>	<u>200</u>	<u>194</u>	<u>14%</u>	<u>394</u>	<u>38.0%</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>1399</u>
<u>2010</u>	<u>75</u>	<u>123</u>	<u>9%</u>	<u>512</u>	<u>36.2%</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>1413</u>
<u>2009</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>88</u>	<u>6%</u>	<u>511</u>	<u>36.1%</u>	<u>33</u>	<u>1416</u>
<u>2008</u>	<u>120</u>	<u>NA</u>	<u>9%</u>	<u>865</u>	<u>64.7%</u>	<u>97</u>	<u>1337</u>

The Town Meeting Research Group concludes from its research in this matter that while it has been asked by the Waitsfield Select Board to propose ideas specifically to increase opportunity and participation in Town Meeting in order to preserve it, it is of primary importance to focus on increasing opportunity and participation in decision-making regardless of whether that is with

Australian ballot or Town Meeting. Therefore, the Town Meeting Research Group will propose ideas for both.

What Am I Voting For?

The Town Meeting Research Group has concluded that regardless of whether a town uses Australian ballot or Town Meeting, increasing opportunity and participation in decision-making can be achieved by ensuring Waitsfield residents:

- Are informed about the issues the town is deliberating
- Understand what are the sources of the budget
- Can easily see what are the uses of the budget

Approach

The Town Meeting Research Group strongly recommends a tinkering approach. It intends to offer a variety of ideas and options and recommends that the town embrace a trial and error approach to trying different ideas over time. This approach emulates what other towns have done. It encourages an experimental and flexible mindset, which the Town Meeting Research Group believes is the best approach to adopt.

Framework of Inquiry

All Options On The Table

The Town Meeting Research Group is evaluating both the Australian ballot and the traditional Town Meeting concepts. Both approaches have support and interest amongst the Town Meeting Research Group members. The Town Meeting Research Group believes it is important to consider both approaches to reflect the different positions on this issue within the Waitsfield community. This will foster open and healthy discussion and help get community support for those ideas that the Waitsfield Select Board does choose to try.

Australian ballot

Australian ballot conceptually permits more participation without attendance by permitting flexible voting times and absentee ballot voting. Town Meeting day requires attendance during a work day, which prevents attendance by residents who for one reason or another can't attend.

One idea is to consider Australian ballot on town meeting day but with one or a series of Select Board meetings (possibly starting in January) well in advance of town meeting day where the referendum items are discussed and where residents can ask questions, voice their concerns and petition for changes to the referendums.

Under this approach, these “pre-meetings” would be well organized. There could be several of them. And there would be enough advance notice that the Valley Reporter could help with informing the residents. There would also be other methods available to the Waitsfield Select Board that is discussed in detail in the “Information Sharing Strategy” section below.

The Town Meeting Research Group acknowledges this approach will both help include residents who currently can’t attend town meeting day and exclude other residents who can’t attend 2-3 weeks of Select Board meetings in advance of the town meeting day. The Town Meeting Research Group has no idea whether the final outcome will improve participation or not.

Town Meeting

A Series of Small Ideas

Another idea is to move the school meeting and school budget vote to another time and then move the start time of the Town Meeting to either 4pm, 5pm or 6pm with the town shared meal occurring on site (to save time) at 7:30pm. Middlesex adopted these changes and saw their attendance increase by about 50 voters. This might help residents leave work early - (or not have to leave work early at all) – and still be able to attend Town Meeting Day. Rides could be offered to anyone interested. Additionally, Middlesex always holds the budget vote at the same time each year -- the moderator manages the agenda so that the budget is taken up at a predictable time.

Executing the “Information Sharing Strategy” ideas [see below] could potentially help expedite the meeting by front-loading information sharing about the issues and budget.

A Bigger Idea

Waitsfield Select Board could test out using technologies available today [and in use to varying degrees by other Vermont towns] to have Town Meeting reach out to residents. This idea would need to be pursued carefully but Robert’s Rules do now permit the use of technologies to extend Town Meeting out to non-present residents.

Middlesex, VT using Skype

Middlesex is the only town in Vermont that we are aware of that supports remote participation of voters. Middlesex uses Skype for visual and telephones for audio to support remote two-way participation. At most, up to four non-present residents have joined from remote locations. A volunteer proxy present at Town Meeting supports each non-present resident. This volunteer functions as the go-between for the non-present resident. It appears this works reasonably well.

When the remote participant wants to speak, the proxy raises a sign with the remote participant’s name on it and, when called on, turns the computer monitor around for the remote

participant to address the moderator. If the remote participant wants to talk, she/he raises their hand as would any other present voter.

Middlesex was concerned that they would have more remote participants than they would have volunteers. They proceeded nonetheless and at the moment they only have four or less non-present residents attending Town Meeting in this manner. Middlesex has not dealt with a paper ballot using remote voting, but it would possibly be possible through email.

Other Technology Initiatives

There is an organization, www.democracyOS.org, that is working on a user-friendly, open-source, vote and debate tool, crafted for parliaments, parties and decision-making institutions that will allow citizens to get informed, join the conversation and vote on topics, just how they want their representatives to vote.

While this effort appears to be in the early stages of a kickstarter campaign, it seems logical to keep an eye on efforts such as this. Waitsfield may at some point in the future be able to adopt a pre-built out platform that can extend town meeting out to non-present residents securely and satisfactorily.

Ideas Discussed by the TMRG

The Town Meeting Research Group has begun discussions around what a Skype or Google Hangout hardware configuration might look like for Waitsfield's Town Meeting. The discussions focus on how to get the Moderator two-way communication and how to permit the Moderator to manage amendment requests from both the present and non-present members.

In the matter of two-way communication management the Town Meeting Research Group is looking at the Middlesex, Vermont model as one solution and is also looking at large monitor displays that can host multiple skype or google hangout sessions with some communication control mechanism for the Moderator. In the matter of amendment management, the Town Meeting Research Group does not have a solution to test out.

If and when the Waitsfield Select Board approves any testing of using these technologies to extend Town Meeting out to non-present residents, the Town Meeting Research Group recommends that baby steps first are the way to proceed. For example, the Waitsfield Select Board and town residents might support a test of one or two residents purposefully remaining at home during a future Town Meeting.

Information Sharing Strategy - Front-Load The Conversation

The Town Meeting Research Group currently proposes three ways to give our town residents the information they need to make their own informed decision regardless of whether it is at Town Meeting or by Australian ballot

- **Consider additional ways to promote the budget committee meetings (Front Porch, Email, other).**
- Front-Load Information Sharing Strategy
- Email/Text/Phone Response System

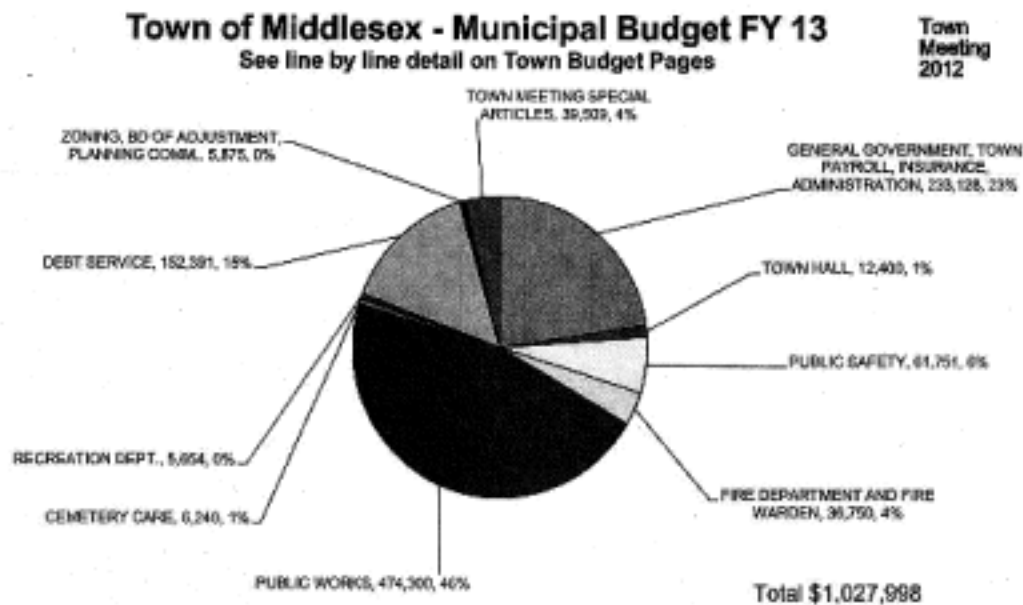
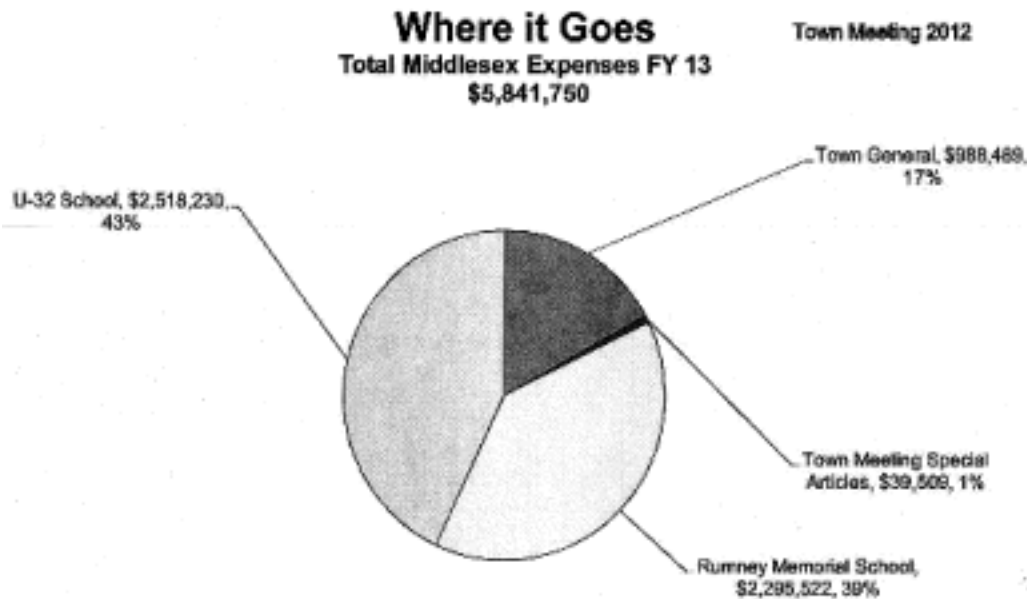
The Town Meeting Research Group envisions these solutions in place year-round – not just leading up to Town Meeting Day. These solutions – and others focused on pushing out information to our town residents – will serve to increase opportunity for involvement in town matters. Increasing opportunity is one of the two outcomes the Town Meeting Research Group has embedded in its mission.

Front-Load Information Sharing Strategy

Middlesex, VT shares pertinent information well in advance of Town Meeting Day and has print outs of the same information for Town Meeting Day. Examples from the Town of Middlesex, VT are below. **As a compliment to the existing Town Report** the Town Meeting Research Group recommends Waitsfield adopt these same practices and again points out that adopting a front-loading information sharing strategy increases the probability of an increase in participation in town matters. Increasing participation is the second of the two outcomes the Town Meeting Research Group has embedded in its mission.

[A New Report: What Each Item Means For You For Your Taxes](#)

A New Report: How The Budget is spent



A New Report: Town Meeting Explanation

The town of Middlesex, Vermont prepares an explanation page that is distributed at the start of Town Meeting Day along with the other reports shown above. This is an artifact that could be distributed both electronically, in advance of Town Meeting, to all residents – whether they can attend or not. It would also be useful with Australian ballot.

Welcome to the Middlesex Town Meeting!

Explanation of Some Common Phrases You Will Hear

Welcome! This flyer is provided simply as background to help all voters participate fully. The Moderator is trained to make sure all voters are heard and their questions answered. If you have any questions, just raise your hand and ask.

The Warning

The "warning" is the agenda for the meeting. Only articles on the warning ("warned articles") can be considered at Town Meeting. The warning for this year's meeting appears in the Middlesex Annual Report.

Australian Ballot

Some items that appear on the warning are not discussed and voted on at the traditional face-to-face Town Meeting, but are voted on in the voting booths on pre-printed, paper "Australian ballots." In Middlesex, you will vote on town officers and school issues via Australian ballot, and sometimes other articles as well. Items that are voted on by Australian ballot may not be discussed at Town Meeting while the polls are open.

Robert's Rules of Order

According to state law, Town Meetings in Vermont are governed by a set of parliamentary rules called "Robert's Rules of Order." The Town Moderator is

trained in using Robert's Rules, and will refer to them when necessary. A few of the more commonly used elements are included here.

The Main Motion

Example: "I move to accept Article 6 as written." Each article on the warning must be "moved" and seconded; it is then ready to be discussed by the group. In discussion, citizens raise their hands and are called on by the Moderator. When you are called on, stand up, state your name, then speak your mind.

The Amendment

"Amending" a motion proposes a change to the main motion. Example: An article is moved and seconded; then, during discussion, someone says, "I move to amend Article 17 by reducing the dollar amount from \$10,000 to \$5,000." After someone seconds this, debate shifts to discussing this amendment. Once people have discussed the amendment, the Moderator puts the amendment to a vote. If the voters reject the amendment, the group now returns to discussing the original main motion. If the voters approve the amendment, the discussion focuses on the main motion as amended.

(More → →)

Remember,
if you have a
question, just
raise your hand
and ask.

Town Meeting Evaluation Form: Your Ideas Wanted!

→ The most effective / useful elements of our Town Meeting were:

→ What I would change about our Town Meeting:

→ Additional comments or suggestions (more room on other side):

Please return this form in the drop-box by the door, or mail to the Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee, c/o Town Hall, 5 Church St., Middlesex VT 05602. The results will be given to the Selectboard and used to improve our Town Meeting. Thank you!

The Vote

Once the Moderator feels all points of view have been heard, s/he will call for a vote. If you are in favor of the motion, you will say "Aye." If opposed, say "No" or "Nay." Other forms of voting that you may expect to see at Town Meeting:

—A show of hands or a standing vote: May be asked for if a voter disagrees with the Moderator after the results of a voice vote is announced.

—Paper ballot: Any voter may move that a vote be taken via paper ballot; if seven voters support this motion, pieces of paper will be distributed and you will write your vote and pass it in. It will be counted immediately.

Point of Order

If you don't understand a ruling of the Moderator, speak up, saying "Point of order, Mr./Ms. Moderator."

After you are recognized by the Moderator, ask your question.

Call the Question

If debate has gone on long enough—voters have made up their minds but some people are still repeating the same basic arguments—a voter can move to cut off debate or "call the question." If you agree that all voices have been heard and you

are ready to vote on the issue at hand, you should vote in favor of calling the question. However, if you want to continue discussion, you should vote against calling the question. Two-thirds of the group must vote yes on calling the question in order to cease debate; otherwise, discussion continues.

In most cases, "calling the question" is not necessary. The Moderator will call for a vote when s/he feels that all points of view have been heard, and this avoids having to vote on calling the question.

Pass Over

Sometimes it becomes clear to the voters that they aren't ready to make a vote yes or no, and the preference is to not vote on the article at all. At this point, someone may move to "pass over" an article. (An article may also be passed over because it will be handled by Australian ballot.)

➤ If you'd like to speak, just raise your hand.

When recognized by the Moderator, stand up, say your name, and speak up so all can hear you.

Compiled by the Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee, based on information from the Vermont Institute for Government.

➤ More information on Town Meeting, as well as the many committees and organizations that help keep Middlesex vibrant, can be found in the **Middlesex Operator's Manual**, available at Town Hall or the Rumney School. This information and more can also be found at Middlesex's website: www.middlesex-vt.org.

Town Meeting Evaluation Form—more room for your comments.

Email/Text/Phone Response System

The Town Meeting Research Group has discussed the idea of creating a quasi-real-time feedback mechanism for the Waitsfield Select Board, Waitsfield Planning Commission, Waitsfield Development Review Board and all other public entities of the town. The group would research and test simple and inexpensive and/or free constructs that would enable the Waitsfield Select Board to ask town residents what their position was on an issue.

The communication would go out via email or text or telephone and the responses would be collected, collated and presented back to the Waitsfield Select Board. While at first this would be a non-scientific and non-secure method of communication with the town residents, it is estimated that well over 80% of town residents have access to and use daily email or text. For voters not using email or text, communication could be through the Valley Reporter.

The town boards could increase opportunity to participate by proactively seeking out feedback using these technologies that can deliver back to the decision makers at a participation rate much higher than even Town Meeting Day itself. All results could be made public on the town website – and these updates could themselves be emailed out to all residents who ask for it – further increasing opportunity to be informed and to participate in town matters.

This mechanism has the opportunity to enable the Waitsfield Select Board [and all boards] to understand how residents feel about any given issue.

Appendix

Contributing Members:

1. Sally Kendall – approves final report
2. Gary Kingsbury – approves final report
3. Ted Laskaris – approves final report
4. Deri Meier – approves final report
5. Suzanne Peterson – approves final report
6. Nancy Turner – approves final report
7. Sheila Ware – approves final report
8. Rob Williams – approves final report

Resources:

1. www.ncdd.org
2. <http://democracyos.org/>
3. TED TALK:
 - a. http://www.ted.com/talks/pia_mancini_how_to_upgrade_democracy_for_the_internet_era?utm_source=newsletter_daily&utm_campaign=daily&utm_medium=email&utm_content=image_2014-10-08#t-628665

Report of the East Montpelier Town Meeting Solutions Committee

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Committee Members

Flor Diaz, Chair

Philip Heinz, Vice Chair

Carl Etnier, Secretary

Joyce Bean

David Coburn

Andrew Christiansen

Introduction

As of March 2014, East Montpelier's town and school meetings used a mix of floor votes and Australian ballot voting to decide issues. An article was warned for school meeting to shift the mixture more in the direction of Australian ballot by moving the vote on the school budget from the school meeting floor to an Australian ballot.

Arguments for and against the article were similar to those made in other towns that have considered shifting questions to Australian ballot. Proponents were concerned about access to the ballot for voters who would be affected by the taxes raised and pointed to lower participation rates for town and school meeting floor votes, compared with Australian ballot votes on the same day. Single mothers, soldiers in the military, those who could not leave work, and others who faced challenges in attending town meeting should not be stripped of their rights to weigh in on questions that were of great concern, was an argument. Town meeting votes were portrayed as an undemocratic anachronism, similar to those laws that deliberately barred the vote from women and minorities.

Opponents of the shift pointed out that town meetings provide a give and take that promotes a full understanding of the issues as well as the views of one's neighbors. Amending articles can avoid the expense of repeated budget votes. And floor votes preserve the enfranchisement of direct democracy.

After participants expressed sympathy with the concerns of both parties, voters passed a substitute amendment to explore all options to improve accessibility and to report back to the school board before December 1, 2014. The committee charged with

the task of creating this report looked at what other towns had done, reviewed the literature on the subject, and met with Susan Clark (moderator in Middlesex and co-author of *All Those in Favor* and *Slow Democracy*).

Historical Background

Town meeting¹ attendance has declined across the state over the last forty years. From the dataset of over 2,000 town meetings put together by University of Vermont professor Frank Bryan between 1970 and 2011, several conclusions can be drawn. The most important variable in declining attendance is population. As towns get larger, the percentage of registered voters participating in town meeting goes down (see Figure 1 (Fig. 3.2 from Frank Bryan's *Real Democracy*)).

1 The article that authorized the formation of this committee was voted on in East Montpelier's school meeting and referred specifically to school meeting. However, school meeting and town meeting in East Montpelier are inextricably intertwined. They are held at the same location, on the same day, with the same moderator (by voters' choice; the moderator offices are separate). Which meeting occurs first alternates from year to year. For these reasons, the committee addressed town and school meeting together. Unless otherwise specified, the generic term "town meeting" refers to both town meeting and school meeting.

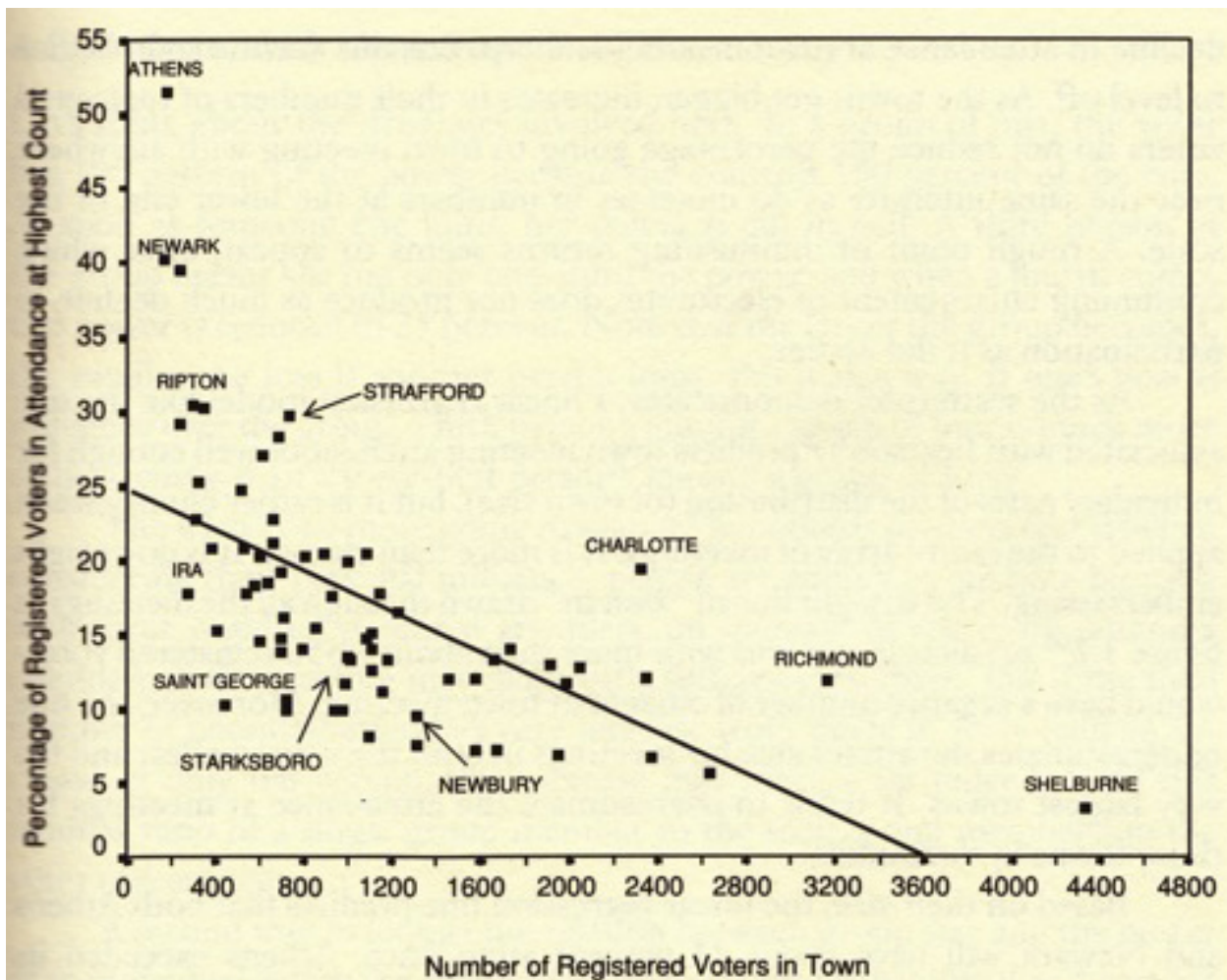


Figure 3.2. Town size and meeting attendance: the linear model (70 town meetings, 1992).

Figure 1 The relationship of population and town meeting attendance

In towns as a whole, participation as a percentage of registered voters has gone down.

Figure 2 shows the statewide trend plotted against attendance data from East Montpelier.

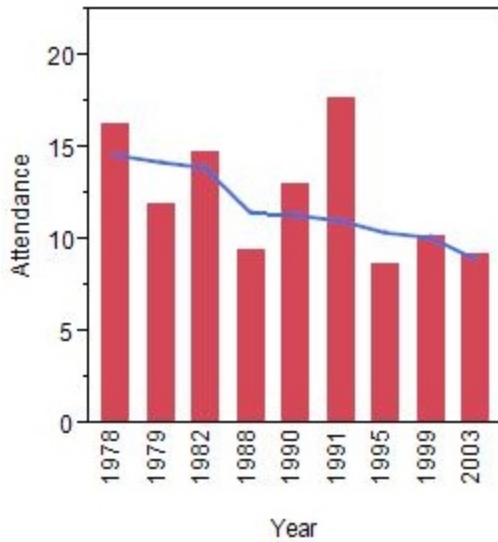


Figure 2. East Montpelier's attendance as a percentage of registered voters (red bars) and expected attendance (blue line) with *only* Frank Bryan's data. Figure by Anders Christiansen, 2014.

Another variable is the use of Australian ballot. Between 1970 and 1998, towns using Australian ballots had significantly less attendance at town meeting than those without (Figure 3; Figure 4.2 from *Real Democracy*). The effect was greater in smaller towns.

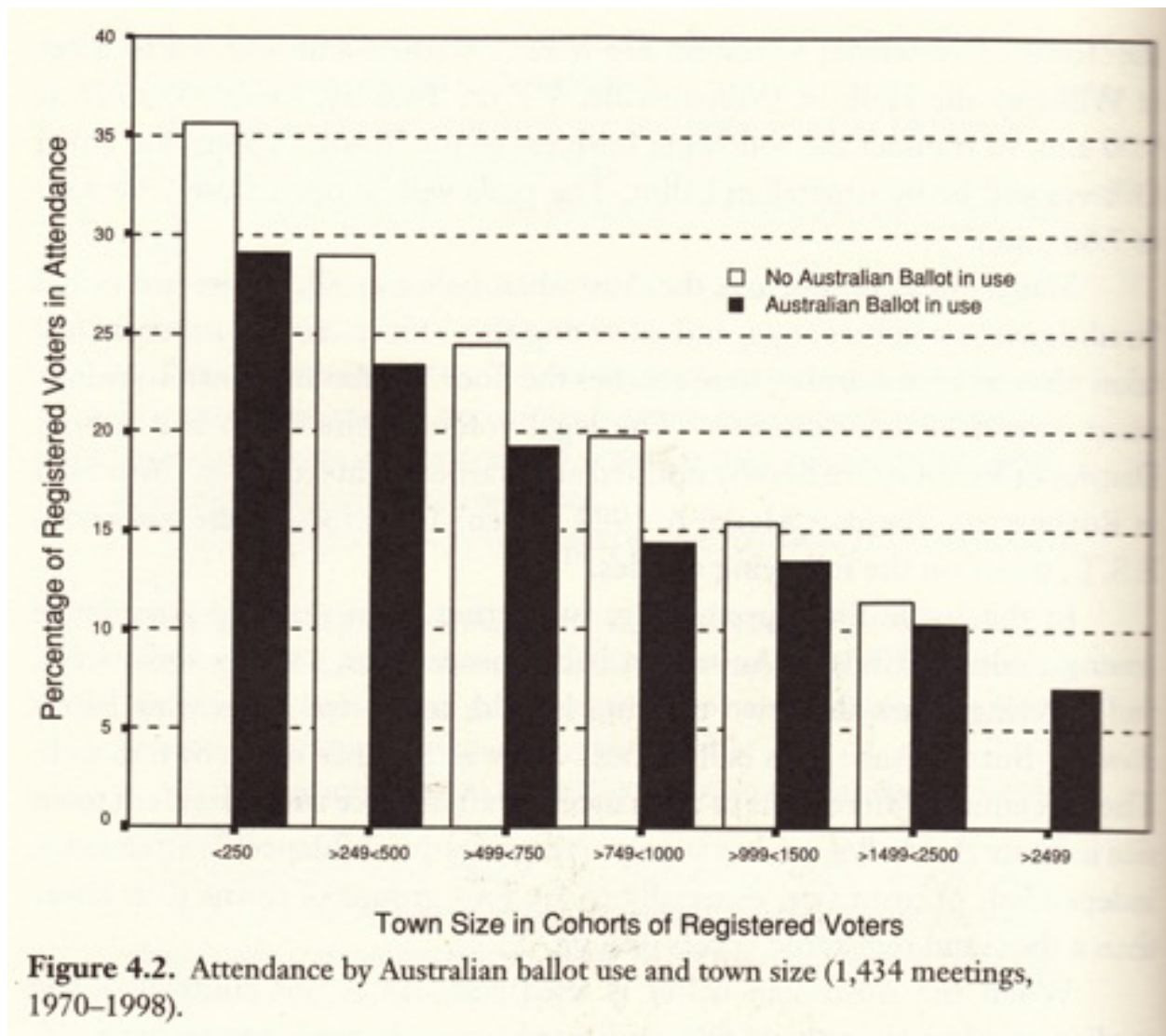


Figure 3. The Relationship between Australian Ballots and Town Meeting Attendance

With the exception of election of officers, Australian ballot was not used in East Montpelier's first 143 years dating back to 1850, but this changed in 1993 when the town voted on several articles that would move the process to Australian ballot. Article 7 said: "To see if the Town will establish a Reserve Fund, pursuant to the authority established under 24 V.S.A. Section 2804, for the purpose of funding capital

improvements and to be funded from payments made to the Town under the terms of the Host Town Agreement between Central Vermont Landfill, Inc. and the Town, and by Town appropriations. Expenditures from this fund will be approved by the voters.” This was amended by a show of hand-held ballots to remove “by Town Appropriations” and add, “Expenditures from this fund will be approved by the voters by Australian Ballot.” This then passed by a voice vote.

Article 8 read: “Shall the Town of East Montpelier adopt its annual budget, and decide all financial expenditures of \$10,000 or more by Australian Ballot?” This was amended to read, “Shall the Town of East Montpelier adopt its annual town budget and decide all capital expenditures of \$10,000 or more which were not included in the Town Budget by Australian Ballot?” This passed with hand-held ballots by four votes, 116-112. This must have been a contentious issue even then as a motion was made when the meeting resumed after lunch and the School Meeting, to reconsider Article 8. This motion was defeated by a voice vote.

Article 11 read: “Shall the Town of East Montpelier vote by Australian Ballot to adopt, reject, or amend all town plans?” This was defeated by a voice vote.

Twenty-one years later when the town met for its 165th annual meeting, only those budget items below \$10,000 were considered at Town Meeting. Of the warned articles, 96.6% of the total proposed expenditures were decided by Australian ballot and 3.4% were decided by a floor vote at Town Meeting. In the 2014 School Meeting, as it was with the Town and School meetings in 1993, 100% of the expenditures were decided in a Town Meeting. If the Town and School expenditures are added together,

the amount decided by town meeting rises to 68% and those by Australian ballot are 32%.

There is currently a local effort to move more of the town meeting agenda to Australian ballot. According to the Secretary of State Annual Survey, 45 Vermont towns use only Australian ballot and 112 use it at least partially. Town meeting is used exclusively in 77 towns. At the last Town Meeting Day, in March 2014, three articles to move items of business to Australian ballot were defeated in Calais. A special meeting was called for November to move the vote on the Kellogg-Hubbard Library contribution to Australian ballot, and again the move was defeated. Proponents have vowed to continue calling for special meetings until they succeed. In Warren, an attempt to move the school budget to Australian ballot was defeated 111-48. Under new business, Moretown bucked the trend and decided to warn an article for the 2015 meeting that would get rid of Australian ballot and go back to town meeting votes.

At the East Montpelier March 2014 School meeting, Article 6 proposed moving the school budget to Australian ballot. A substitute amendment was passed that read, "Shall the School District form a committee representing a broad range of interests from throughout the town to explore options, technological or otherwise, to increase accessibility to the East Montpelier Town School District Annual Meeting and submit their report to the School Board no later than December 1, 2014? This article passed as amended, 103 yes; 67 no.

In May of this year, supporters of Australian ballot successfully petitioned for a special school meeting for the purpose of again voting on whether to adopt school

budgets by Australian ballot. The meeting was held on June 16. Supporters acknowledged that some townspeople worried that adopting the Australian ballot would lead to less discussion about the school budget and would damage the spirit and tradition of the annual town meeting, but their intent was to ensure access to voting “for 100 percent of East Montpelier’s voters.” Arguments were made that town meeting would still be vibrant and could be enhanced by having informational meetings beforehand and by having an online discussion forum.

Another citizen disagreed, saying we were walking away from a couple of hundred years of history, and that he hoped “we’re not doing that lightly.” Without a budget to vote on, he predicted that people would no longer have any reason to come to town meeting, “no matter how good the lunch is” and that within a decade or two the next generation wouldn’t know anything about it. He concluded, “Once you give something up, it’s very difficult to get it back.”

A motion to cease debate and call the question garnered the necessary two-thirds votes (158 of 201 cast) and the article passed on a voice vote. If next year’s [budget](#) proposals are similar to this year, the effect of the vote to move the School budget to Australian ballot means that 99% of all expenditures (Town plus School) will be decided by Australian ballot, and 1 percent will be voted at Town Meeting.

This committee began its organizing meetings in May, before the special school meeting. It determined that as the article warned for the special meeting was silent on the subject of this committee, the charge from school meeting to the committee remained in force. Members were solicited. People were invited to submit their names

for the committee at the special June town meeting, through Front Porch Forum, and by phone calls. To assure balance, people on both sides of the issue were invited to join.

The group as finally constituted began meeting in early October, discussing what we saw as the direction given to us by the March meeting, available accessibility options, and the difference between increased accessibility and increased participation. Looking around our immediate area, we saw that Middlesex had gone through a similar process and had a “Town Meeting Solutions Committee.” Since it has similar goals and some instructive history to draw upon, we adopted that name for our group and invited Susan Clark, who was one of the founders of the committee, the town meeting moderator in Middlesex, and an author of books about local democracy to speak to us.

The East Montpelier Town Meeting Solutions Committee

Much of our information came from our discussion with Susan Clark, analysis of attendance and voting patterns, a phone conversation with the Vermont Secretary of State’s office, and reading the literature available; primarily newspaper accounts, old town reports, and books – *Real Democracy – The New England Town Meeting and How it Works* by Frank M. Bryan (University of Chicago Press, 2004) and *All Those in Favor* by Susan Clark and Frank Bryan (2005).

From Susan Clark, we learned that Middlesex started their committee in 2001 and the goal was to increase participation. First, they did a survey. This explored the question of access to see what the issues are. When it comes to attending town meeting, there are people who can’t and there are people who don’t. She described an “us versus them” mentality in Middlesex of old-timers versus new-comers who had only been in town for some decades. There is a geographical divide (a mountain through the

middle of town). Some people didn't feel comfortable getting up to talk. It was imperative to improve communication. One of their successful projects was to create a "user's manual" for the town written from the needs of a citizen instead of a municipal official. People need to feel invited and welcome, Clark said.

Technology has made remote participation possible, Clark noted, but it requires a heavy-duty commitment from volunteers. The main concern voiced in Middlesex by those advocating Australian ballot was to guarantee access to the meeting for those who were homebound, in the military, or at work. Despite the perception that town meeting denied these people a vote, since 2008 when a remote option was made available, they have only had one consistent user, a citizen who is homebound with an illness. Others have used it from time to time.

Middlesex uses the software GoToMeeting for video streaming and, because of streaming speed issues, they use a phone for the audio. Clark explained that Solutions Committee volunteers go to a user's house for the first time to test and set things up. When a user connects to the meeting, he or she can use a "chat" window on the screen to communicate with the volunteer who is assisting. If a user wants to speak, the volunteer will hold up a card with the user's name on it so the moderator will know who it is. The highest number of users they have had at a time is four people, and one volunteer at town meeting has been sufficient to handle that number.

Votes on the floor by paper ballots pose a problem for legal reasons, then-Secretary of State Deb Markowitz advised the town. Markowitz saw remote access to paper ballot voting as a proxy vote. Because there is time stamp on the video and the chat screen or an emailed vote, those of us on the East Montpelier committee thought it

may be possible to accommodate paper ballot voting after discussion with the current Secretary of State. We also discussed possible new legislation at the state level to clarify the issue.

Clark said it took from 2001 to 2008 to implement remote participation because the committee was split and the Selectboard was opposed. There was a concern about what would happen if 200 people decided to stay home and how it would affect the quality of the meeting for those who were there. To preserve the quality of participation, priorities were set that considered illness, being homebound, public service, and out-of-town work or schooling, or out of town for personal reasons. "This is like a handicapped sticker and is volunteer intensive, and could disrupt the meeting," she said, so setting priorities is important.

Asked if these efforts and their moving the meeting into the evening of Town Meeting Day had increased participation, Clark said that participation has remained consistent at around 175 to 200 people. She reported the Selectboard was happy with the way things have been going, though they lost a few village people when the meeting was moved from the town hall to the elementary school to hold more people. Another thing they do is to vote on the budget at a set time. The meeting starts at 4, but the budget debate starts at 5:15.

We asked her about the advisability of a survey and she said that "a survey could help see what bee is in everyone's bonnet." She said she believed that while arguments were made on behalf of those who couldn't make it to the meeting, the real reasons in Middlesex for supporting Australian ballot was anger over school spending, the feeling that move-ins had taken over the town, and a question of trust and transparency.

To encourage participation, Middlesex sends out a welcome letter to new voters every year. It distributes to all voters a breakdown of where the town's money comes from and where it all goes. The paper uses simple graphics and is written by a volunteer CPA in town.

Middlesex has 6 to 10 people on their Solutions Committee. They meet all year except for the summer. They have no budget and are not part of the town government.

We asked her what the most important things we could do or suggest in our report. Number one would be a survey and two – childcare (but we already have that). Middlesex uses Front Porch Forum a month before the meeting and feeds out tidbits like "Who's the Robert in Robert's Rules?" "Why is it called a warning?" and "Why is food important?", using a little humor.

One of our members asked if we are working at cross purposes promoting a town meeting, when with Australian ballot there is nothing for them to do at the meeting. Why come? Clark agreed there had to be a reason for people to come to a town meeting. It is hard to get them to come if there is nothing for them to do. People generally don't come to informational meetings. Responding to rising property taxes, she said, towns are getting rid of their town meetings, but she sees this as throwing out the baby with the bath water.

One committee member asked if trends in Vermont could be ascribed to a declining interest in democracy in the country. Clark responded that town meeting is still seen by places and organizations that don't have it as something to emulate; there are attempts in business and elsewhere to promote face-to-face meetings which were like town meetings.

In closing, Clark recommended that we collect and report on good ideas and she thought there would be enough work to keep a committee such as ours busy for a year. She recommended the survey, have more online transparency, and have face-to-face meetings.

Options and Recommendations

Many suggestions have been made to the committee and options explained in the books we have read about things the town could do to increase accessibility and participation. They include changing the venue to a larger space to accommodate more people, changing to an evening meeting, moving the meeting to a weekend, having separate meetings for the school and the town, and Australian ballot. Research by Frank Bryan looking at decades of data shows that none of these work to increase attendance. We have also discussed technological assistance for remote participation, which did not exist at the time Bryan's book was published.

Still, there are steps that should be taken if we want to maintain or even strengthen a vibrant local democracy. The first step would be to conduct a survey. We should find out the current level of interest in remote access, for it would be foolish to implement procedures and invest in technologies if there is no interest. The survey from Middlesex offers ideas that could be used in such a survey and can be seen in Appendix 1. The flyer that they give to voters at town meeting is in Appendix 2. The list of questions that our East Montpelier committee came up with were the following:

Possible Survey Questions:

1. Name, email, phone, address, and contact information if desired to be kept informed or to be on mailing list of the Town Meeting Solutions Committee. Can also be anonymous.
2. How many times have you attended town meeting in the last five years?
3. Why did you attend – or not attend the meetings?
4. Was accessibility an issue for you? If so, what could be done to resolve that?
5. If resolved, would you then participate in the meeting?
6. If you had to choose between town meeting and going skiing or some other recreational activity, which would you choose?
7. If you are required to work, could you ask your employer for the day off? If not, is that because of the nature of the job or because of lost income? At work, would you be able to monitor on a phone or other device, the issue you were most interested in if it was clearly designated on the screen (titles, labels, etc.) or would work preclude that?
8. Which is more important for the functioning of a democracy: a face-to-face meeting, or the use of ballots?
9. Would you be interested in technology to increase accessibility for those in the military or those confined to home or busy at work?
10. How important is it to keep the traditional town meeting? Why or why not?
11. Which mode of expression is most clear in giving feedback to the school board:
 - Email
 - Mail
 - Phone call
 - Town meeting discussion
 - Town meeting amendments
 - Australian ballot
12. Would you be interested in a hybrid approach that would have one meeting that would allow direct democracy (to introduce amendments to the articles) and then a later Australian ballot?
13. Do you have access to a computer (your own, a family member's, a neighbor's, a public computer somewhere) to be online?

Having formulated these questions, we conferred with the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont. Michael Moser, Research Specialist and Coordinator for the Vermont State Data Center said that he could provide assistance to

the committee in shaping these questions to be scientifically accurate as well as be suitable as a baseline for future surveys. One hurdle would be the cost of mailing these surveys out to everyone on the checklist. A minimal cost of \$2,000 would cover printing and postage, but there would still need to be data analysis. To reduce costs to the town, there are grants that could be applied for and volunteer labor could be used. One scenario would be to hand the surveys out when people check in to vote in the next election at town meeting and then find volunteers to phone those not checked off the checklist.

Second, serious consideration should be given to extending the term of this committee or encouraging the formation of a new committee to pursue these goals. There are still other scenarios that haven't yet been explored. For example, it may be possible to have a traditional face-to-face town meeting where people could exercise their legislative duties to amend articles on the warning, including budget items and then have that followed up by a vote that would be done at a later date by Australian ballot. Research into ways that state law could be shaped to account for the technological changes we have witnessed in recent years could breathe new life into old democratic traditions.

Third, if East Montpelier has gotten too large for an equitable sampling of its interests in a town meeting, perhaps a representative town meeting like Brattleboro uses should be considered. Although Bryan and Clark (*All Those in Favor*) recommend it for towns of over 5,000 voters (East Montpelier has 2,014 at the time of this report), representative town meeting would least preserve the advantages of a town meeting in

offering face-to-face discussion and flexibility to amend school budgets without having to go repeatedly to the voters for yes-no votes.

Additional suggestions the committee considered:

- Alternate town and school meetings, for 90 minutes apiece, until all business is accomplished. This procedure might keep be more likely to expose all participants to both meetings.
- Ensure non-controversial items are up front and voted on quickly.
- Streamline the meetings by ending oral reports at town meeting, encouraging people to read the reports in the annual Town Report. Perhaps post recorded oral reports at the town web site. However, without the oral reports, many who haven't read the relevant sections of the Town Report may feel disenfranchised.
- For pre-town meeting, streamline the process by not having candidates say anything or have anyone give routine oral reports. Get to items with potential controversy quickly. However, this assumes that organizers of the meeting know where all the potential controversy lies; some may emerge as part of routine oral reports.
- For pre-town meeting, consider asking ORCA (Onion River Cable Access television) to film it and broadcast it.
- If the town does internet-based activities, consider how to ensure it's accessible to older people or others without computers. Perhaps a "democracy-for-seniors" phone tree would help. On the other hand, it's important not to let the perfect be

the enemy of the good; internet-based activities can increase accessibility of town governance for most of the town, even if not everyone can easily access it.

Summary and Conclusion

Democracy is a key issue of our time. In the town of East Montpelier, a debate has been ongoing between those who want to guarantee equal access to everyone to the ballot versus those who want to preserve the legislative tradition of town meeting and who see Australian ballot, as Wes Cate used to call it, “Fly-by voting.”

Everyone wants to see greater participation at our meetings, whether they are town meetings or informational meetings. There may be a deeper problem than accessibility or transparency, or any of the other variables that are cited for declining participation. Indeed, each of the last two years have seen an overwhelming 73 percent of registered East Montpelier voters not availing themselves of even Australian ballots to register their votes on Town Meeting Day. That is why we need to look at what is happening in our community. That is why the committee was formed and why we are recommending the following actions:

1. Distribute and analyze a survey of the townspeople’s priorities and concerns regarding town governance.
2. The formation of an ongoing Town Meeting Solutions Committee that would analyze trends, offer suggestions, and provide information to assist the citizenry in understanding and participating in its local town government.

3. Evaluate on an on-going basis the options and models available for local governance, whether it is through the assistance of new technology, or if there is growth in the town, adoption of a new type of governance like the representative town meeting that is used by larger towns.

One thing that is clear: we can trust that all of our neighbors who passionately debate these questions are eager for what is best for each citizen and for the town.

Appendix 1 – Middlesex Survey (2001)

SURVEY DRAFT, Version 5.0

Town Meeting

Solutions Committee

Questionnaire for Middlesex Residents

1. We are trying to discover why some people attend town meeting, and others do not. Please rank each of the following items from 1 to 3.

“1” means that the item does not create a problem for you in attending town meeting;

“3” means that this is an item that could prevent you from attending.

	No Problem		Could prevent my attendance
A. Have other commitments at that time	1	2	3
B. Don't have enough information on issues	1	2	3
C. Unable to leave home to attend	1	2	3
D. Out of the area at that time	1	2	3
E. Lack of transportation	1	2	3
F. Lack of child care	1	2	3
G. Problems with facilities: (bathrooms, accessibility, seating, etc.)	1	2	3
H. Not interested in the issues	1	2	3
I. Don't feel it makes a difference if I go or not	1	2	3
J. Not comfortable with the process (public speaking, voting, Robert's Rules, etc.)	1	2	3
K. Other (please describe):	1	2	3

2 We are trying to increase participation in our town meeting. Please check any ideas that you think would help (check as many as you wish).

Communications: Making Sure We Know About the Issues

___ Use more creative ways to get information on local issues out to voters

(e.g., posters, e-mail, field trips, public speakers, celebrations)

___ Create a Middlesex web site which allows viewer response

___ More use of the Middlesex Monthly newspaper to publicize issues

___ Use phone tree or direct mail to encourage participation in meetings

___ Other : **Access: Helping People Participate in Town Meeting**

___ Allow citizens to participate actively and vote in town meeting from other locations (from home or abroad) by using current computer technology

___ Bigger / more accessible space for town meeting

___ Provide interpreters (sign language, foreign language)

___ Provide child care

___ Provide transportation

___ Other suggestions:

Town Meeting Structure and Content

___ Return the town meeting to face-to-face format (not Australian ballot)

___ Re-join the town meeting with town meeting

___ Include more issues that make a difference in town meeting

(Feel free to list other issues you'd like to see addressed at town meeting)

___ Other suggestions:

Civic Education and Celebration

___ Include young people in town meeting

___ Introduce and welcome new voters at town meeting

___ Recognize those who have contributed to the town at town meeting

___ Other suggestions:

3. We are trying to discover the best time to hold our town meeting. Please indicate your first, second and third choices from the list below.

_____ First Tuesday in March, 10 a.m.

_____ First Tuesday in March, 5 p.m.

_____ First Tuesday in March, 7 p.m.

_____ First Saturday in March, 10 a.m.

_____ First Saturday in March, 1 p.m.

_____ Other:

4. Last year's (2001) Middlesex Town Meeting generated an important discussion regarding whether Middlesex should eliminate our sit-down town meeting and change over to Australian (paper) ballot. Please comment on your thoughts or feelings about the pros and cons of town meeting below.

5. We welcome your participation! If you would like to be on the Town Meeting Solutions Committee mailing list, please write your name, address, phone, and e-mail address below. You will receive meeting minutes and notices of future meetings. All are invited to attend!

Appendix 2 – Citizen’s Flyer – March 2010

Welcome! *This flyer is provided simply as background to help all voters participate fully. The Moderator is trained to make sure all voters are heard and their questions answered. If you have any questions, just raise your hand and ask.*

The Warning

The “warning” is the agenda for the meeting. Only articles on the warning (“warned articles”) can be considered at town meeting. The warning for this year’s meeting appears in the Middlesex Annual Report.

Australian Ballot

Some items that appear on the warning are not discussed and voted on at the traditional face-to-face town meeting, but are voted on in the voting booths on pre-printed, paper “Australian ballots.” In Middlesex, you will vote on town officers and school issues via Australian ballot, and sometimes other articles as well. Items that are voted on by Australian ballot may not be discussed at town meeting while the polls are open.

Robert’s Rules of Order

According to state law, town meetings in Vermont are governed by a set of parliamentary rules called “Robert’s Rules of Order.” The Town Moderator is trained in using Robert’s Rules, and will refer to them when necessary. A few of the more commonly used elements are included here.

The Main Motion

Example: “I move to accept Article 6 as written.” Each article on the warning must be “moved” and seconded; it is then ready to be discussed by the group. In discussion, citizens raise their hands and are called on by the Moderator. When you are called on, stand up, state your name, then speak your mind.

The Amendment

“Amending” a motion proposes a change to the main motion. Example: An article is moved and seconded; then, during discussion, someone says, “I move to amend Article 17 by reducing the dollar amount from \$10,000 to \$5,000.” After someone seconds this, debate shifts to discussing this amendment. Once people have discussed the amendment, the Moderator puts the amendment to a

vote. If the voters reject the amendment, the group now returns to discussing the original main motion. If the voters approve the amendment, the discussion focuses on the main motion *as amended*.

The Vote

Once the Moderator feels all points of view have been heard, s/he will call for a vote. If you are in favor of the motion, you will say “Aye.” If opposed, say “No” or “Nay.” Other forms of voting that you may expect to see at town meeting:

--A show of hands or a standing vote: May be asked for if a voter disagrees with the Moderator after the results of a voice vote is announced.

--Paper ballot: Any voter may move that a vote be taken via paper ballot; if seven voters support this motion, pieces of paper will be distributed and you will write your vote and pass it in. It will be counted immediately.

Point of Order

If you don't understand a ruling of the Moderator, speak up, saying “Point of order, Mr./Ms. Moderator.” After you are recognized by the Moderator, ask your question.

Call the Question

If debate has gone on long enough—voters have made up their minds but some people are still repeating the same basic arguments—a voter can move to cut off debate or “call the question.” If you agree that all voices have been heard and you are ready to vote on the issue at hand, you should vote in favor of calling the question. However, if you want to continue discussion, you should vote against calling the question. Two-thirds of the group must vote yes on calling the question in order to cease debate; otherwise, discussion continues.

In most cases, “calling the question” is not necessary. The Moderator will call for a vote when s/he feels that all points of view have been heard, and this avoids having to vote on calling the question.

Pass Over

Sometimes it becomes clear to the voters that they aren't ready to make a vote yes or no, and the preference is to not vote on the article at all. At this point, someone may move to “pass over” an article. (An article may also be passed over because it will be handled by Australian ballot.)

Compiled by the Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee, based on information from the Vermont Institute for Government.

☐ More information on town meeting, as well as the many committees and organizations that help keep Middlesex vibrant, can be found in the **Middlesex Operator's Manual**, available at Town Hall or the Rumney School. This information and more can also be found at Middlesex's website: **www.middlesex-vt.org**.

Town Meeting Evaluation Form: *Your Ideas Wanted!*

☐ The most effective / useful elements of our town meeting were:

☐ What I would change about our town meeting:

☐

☐ Additional comments or suggestions (more room on other side):

Please return this form in the drop-box by the door, or mail to the Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee, c/o Town Hall, 5 Church St., Middlesex VT 05602. The results will be given to the Selectboard and used to improve our town meeting. Thank you!

References

Bryan, Frank M., *Real Democracy – The New England Town Meeting and How it Works*, The University of Chicago Press, 2004

Clark, Susan and Bryan, Frank, *All Those in Favor – Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community*, Ravenmark, 2005

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Vermont Secretary of State's Office Web Site -

<https://www.sec.state.vt.us/elections/town-meeting-local-elections.aspx>

Newspaper Articles:

"East Montpelier: Australian ballot put on hold, at least for now," by Amy Nixon, *Times Argus*, March 5, 2014

"East Montpelier petition leads to special meeting" by Amy Ash Nixon, *Times Argus*, May 7, 2014

"East Montpelier Adopts Australian Ballot for School Budget," by Amy Nixon, *Times Argus*, June 17, 2014

"Panel Works to Improve Town Meeting Access," by Amy Nixon, *Times Argus*, Junly 16, 2014

"Calais: Floor Meeting Survives, with Some Surprises," *Times Argus*, March 5, 2014

"Calais Rejects Ballot Voting for 4th Time," *Times Argus*, November 9, 2014

"In Vermont, Ballots Are Australian," by Tim Johnson, *Burlington Free Press*, March 2, 2014

"Warren Sticks with Floor Vote," *Times Argus*, March 5, 2014