

REPORT OF THE WEBSTER TOWN MEETING REVIEW COMMITTEE

October 19, 2015

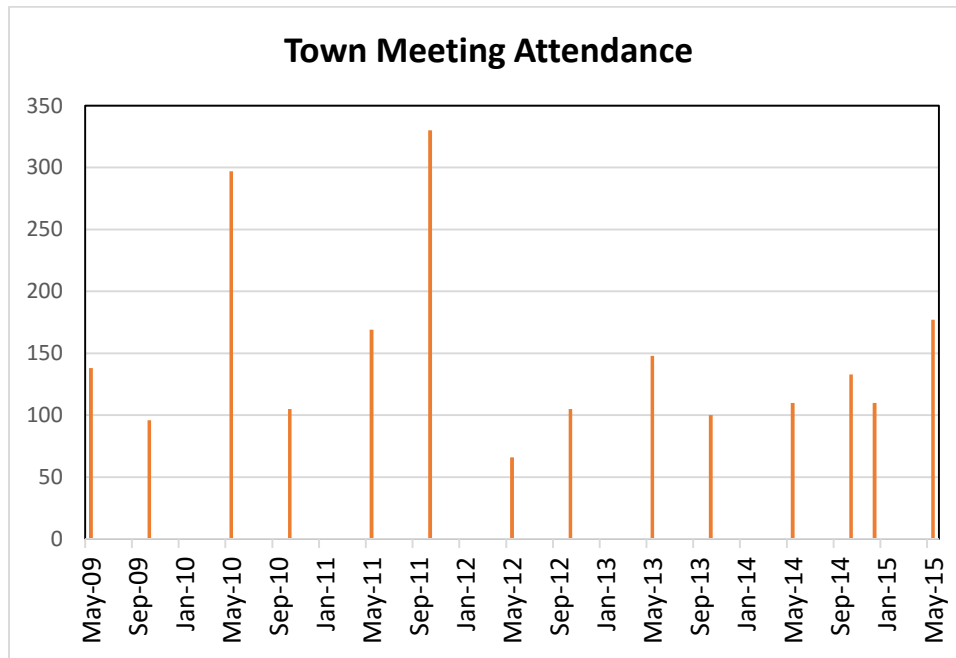
Dear Mr. Moderator:

The Webster Town Meeting Review Committee (TMRC) is pleased to submit this report on our findings and suggestions for improving Webster's Town Meetings.

The TMRC was formed with the approval of a Town Meeting vote in the fall of 2014. The purpose of the committee is to develop proposals for generating better attendance at Webster Town Meetings and to create ways to make the meetings more efficient. Based on discussions with citizens, surveys, and actions taken by other towns, we were able to formulate several suggestions to address challenges with the town meeting process.

TOWN MEETING ATTENDANCE

Attendance at Town Meetings has always consisted of a very small percentage of registered voters. Since 2009, Webster has averaged 149 voters at Town Meetings. This is 1.5% of the total registered voters in town. Attendance ranged from 66 voters (0.7%) to 330 voters (3.4%). These percentages are not unusual for Town Meetings in Massachusetts.



SURVEY RESULTS

The primary source of citizen sentiment and suggestions used by the WTMRC came from a survey that we distributed in April, May, and June. The survey was available online and in paper form at the spring town elections and at the Town Meeting. We were able to collect more than 200 responses. In addition, we offered an open forum (though no citizens attended).

The results of our survey are summarized in Appendix A.

Early on in our process, it became clear that there were very specific issues that discouraged attendance and reduced attendance at Town Meetings. The issues that were of most concern were:

- Speakers talking too long.
- Too many speakers on some issues
- Lack of reliable information about warrant articles
- Poor publicity about the date and time of the Town Meeting
- Lack of understanding of Town Meeting procedures.
- The need for child care.

Several other issues were also raised. Our survey results in Appendix A contains a complete list.

SPEAKER RULES

The Town Meeting process is meant to be deliberative, so citizens should be encouraged to voice their opinions and ask questions. This deliberative process is also the source of many complaints about Town Meetings. Many of the comments received in our survey indicated dissatisfaction with the speakers at the meetings. Citizens felt that a few people talk too long or too frequently. In order to address these complaints, the TMRC sought to develop a balanced solution by crafting a set of guidelines for speakers. These guidelines include limiting the number of speakers, limiting the time allotted to each speaker, limiting the introductory comments, and introducing the use of three microphones (one for those in favor of a motion, one for those against, and one for questions).

The speaker rules (see Appendix B) are not meant to limit debate, but rather to facilitate a more productive debate. Note that the rules allow the Moderator to alter All rules stated herein are subject to interpretation by the Town Moderator and are at his or her sole discretion to enforce and uphold.

At this time, the TMRC recommends that Town Meeting adopt these rules by a majority vote at the start of each Town Meeting. After they have been used for several meetings, it may make sense for the Moderator to add an article to a future Town Meeting to approve the speaker rules as a town by-law.

PUBLICITY

Many respondents were unaware that there was a Town Meeting or they missed Town Meetings because they did not know when they were occurring. We suggest the following methods for ensuring that all voters are aware of Town Meetings:

- Post notices in every public building.
- Utilize the town's LED message board.
- Consider a banner across Main Street.
- Sandwich boards near busy intersections.
- Consider social media advertising.
- Include Town Meeting dates in water/sewer and/or tax bills.

Survey respondents also felt that insufficient information was made available prior the evening to the Town Meeting. We suggest that the information guide be posted on the town's website at least two weeks prior to the Town Meeting. We also recommend that an informational meeting be held immediately prior to the Town Meeting or sometime in the week prior be held so that citizens can have their questions answered. The Town Administrator and relevant department heads would need to be available at the informational meeting. Once it is known what questions citizens may have about the articles, they can be answered as part of the discussion when the article is introduced at the Town Meeting.

TOWN MEETING GUIDE

There is surprisingly large lack of understanding of the Town Meeting process. This lack of understanding discourages some citizens from attending or from participating in discussions about warrant articles. We suggest that a Town Meeting guide be made available to all voters. The guide should explain the purpose of the Town Meeting, the role of the Moderator, and it should be given to or mailed to all new voters and be available online.

ELECTRONIC VOTING

Unlike most voting, Town Meeting votes are usually done in the open. This process can affect the outcome of important votes, as people may be influenced to vote by what they believe is the majority or they may be intimidated by the presence of people who are advocating for or against an article. Secret ballots are rare and dramatically slow down the meeting. Also, on articles with close votes, counting by a show of hands slows down the meeting.

Technology has advanced to a point where electronic voting via smart phones and tablets are well within reasonable cost to consider. The committee viewed a demonstration of an electronic voting system. The system is relatively simple to set-up and administer. It would require the utilization of the Wi-Fi network at Bartlett High School. Voters could use their own smart phones or they would have the option of borrowing a very low cost tablet during the meeting. Because the voting system that was demonstrated was developed by one of the committee members, we will not make any further recommendation other than that electronic voting should be considered.

Conclusions

In summary, the Webster Town Meeting Review Committee is making the following suggestions:

- Adopt speaker rules, including the use of 3 microphones.
- Post notices in every public building.
- Utilize the town's LED message board.
- Consider a banner across Main Street.
- Sandwich boards near busy intersections.
- Consider social media advertising.
- Include Town Meeting notices in water/sewer and/or tax bills.
- Host an informational meeting prior to the Town Meeting
- Post the warrant information guide on the town's website
- Publish a Town Meeting Guide, distribute it to new voters and any other interested residents, and publish it on the town's website.
- Investigate options for electronic voting

We believe that the recommendations that we have made will strengthen the Town Meeting as the legislative body of the Town of Webster. It is important for Webster to act now in order to preserve this most democratic of institutions. Acting now will ensure that meetings run efficiently and effectively. The recommendations that we have made will nourish attendance and citizen satisfaction with the Town Meeting process.

As a final formality, we suggest that the Town Meeting vote to dissolve the Town Meeting Review Committee, but that at some time in the future, a Town Meeting Advisory Committee be considered as a standing committee to assist the Moderator in implementing some of the suggestions that we have made.

We respectfully submit this Final Report on October 19, 2015.

Sincerely,

Kenneth J. Mandile
Chairman

Pamela A. Leduc

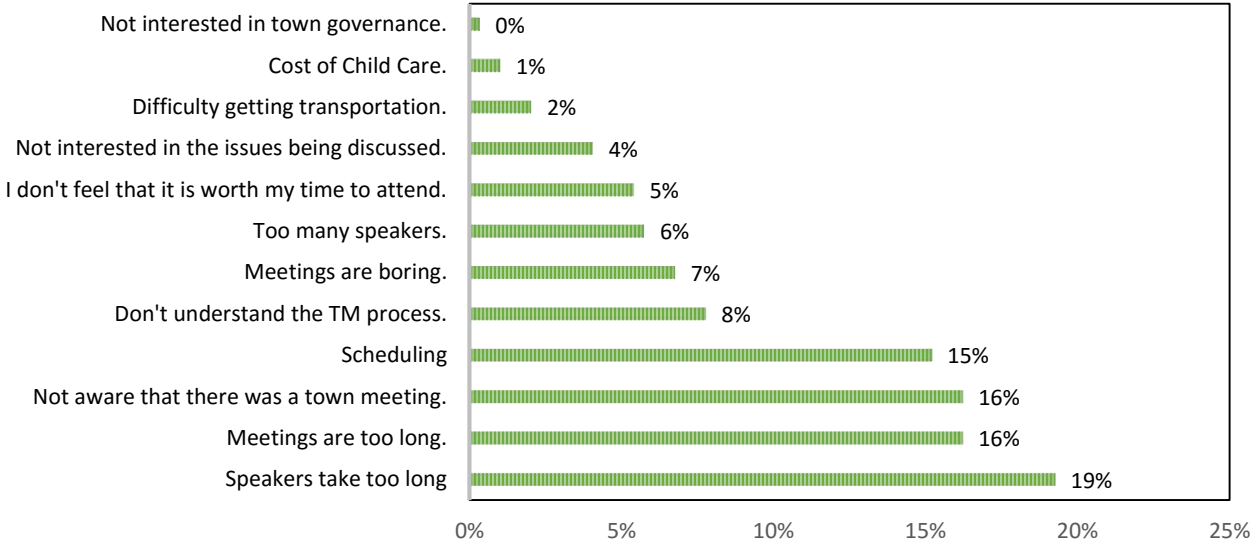
Thomas Ralph, Jr.

Robert J. Miller

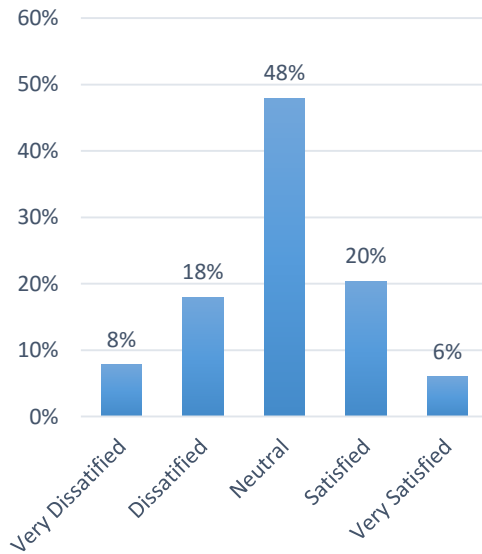
APPENDIX A

SURVEY RESULTS

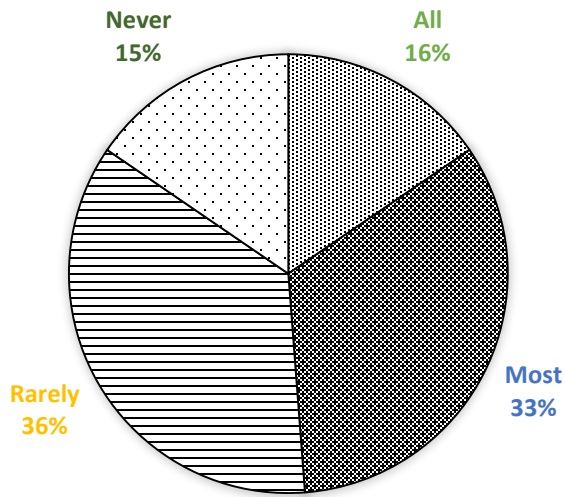
ITEMS THAT NEGATIVELY AFFECT YOUR TOWN MEETING ATTENDANCE

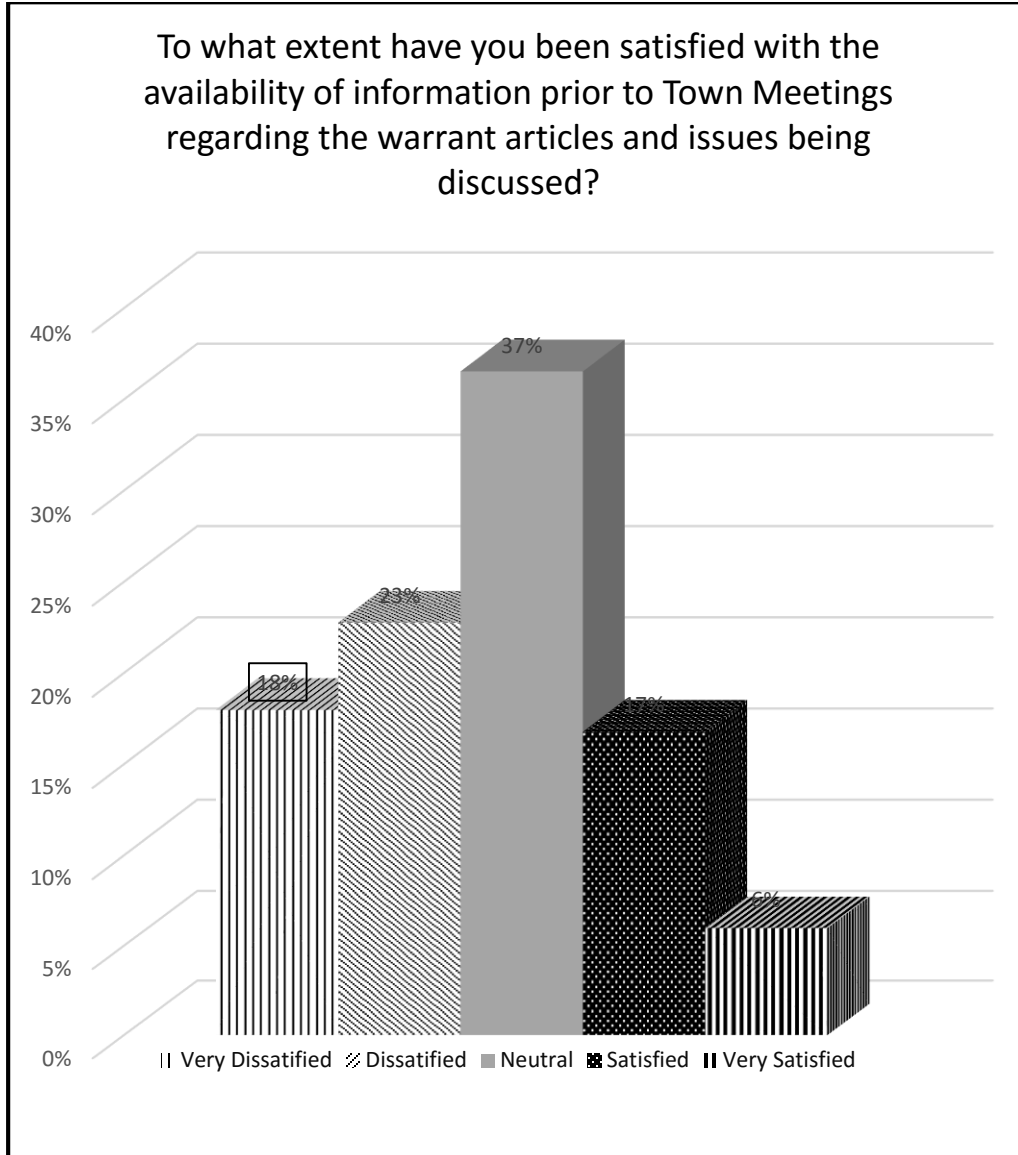


Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the town meeting as it currently exists in Webster?



HOW OFTEN DO YOU ATTEND TOWN MEETINGS?





In the interest of saving paper, citizen comments have not been included in this copy, but are included in the official copy filed with the Town Clerk and provided to the Moderator.

APPENDIX B

Town Meeting Speaker Rules

The sponsor or sponsor's designee shall have the privilege of being the first and last speaker on any article. Said sponsor or designee shall have not more than five (5) minutes to state their initial presentation, and not more than one (1) minute closing at the end of debate. The sponsor or designee shall be required to be present at the main microphone to answer any and all questions directed toward him or her to the best of his or her ability, for the entire duration of the article. For the purpose of Town articles presented to the town meeting body, the person whose name appears on the warrant shall be considered the sponsor.

There shall be no less than three (3) microphones available at any one time for use by town meeting voters. Each microphone shall be designated for use in speaking against the article, speaking in favor of the article, or asking a question directly related to the article being discussed. All questions asked about an article must be asked through the question microphone.

On any article presented to Town Meeting, there shall be a total of not more than fourteen (14) speakers, consisting of not more than seven (7) speakers against and not more than seven (7) speakers in favor. Speakers asking questions and the mover of an article shall not count towards the total number of speakers. Each speaker, excluding the persons listed above, shall have not more than two (2) minutes per speaking instance. A speaker may be granted extensions, in two (2) minute increments, with the approval of the audience, in the form of a two-thirds (2/3) majority vote. Extensions granted to a speaker do not affect the total number of speakers on the article. Each extension granted by the audience shall apply to all following speakers. A speaker may speak more than once on an article, but preference shall be given to speakers who have not yet spoken on the article being debated. Questions shall not have a time limit, but only one (1) question and one (1) follow-up question may be asked per question instance.

Permission to present a special presentation must be received from the Town Moderator not less than one (1) week prior to Town Meeting. The Town Moderator must be given advanced notice, and the time and length of the presentation must be agreed upon prior to the day of Town Meeting. Any requests not received at least seven (7) days prior to the date of Town Meeting shall not be considered for approval.

The provisions stated herein as "Town Meeting Speaker Rules" are severable and if found to be in conflict with any law on the state or local level, shall not prove to defeat the rules in their entirety. Any rule stated herein that shall be found in conflict with provisions stated in Town Meeting Time shall not prove to defeat the entire rule, but only the provision herein found in conflict. All rules stated herein are subject to interpretation by the Town Moderator and are at his or her sole discretion to enforce and uphold.