

An Outline of Town Meeting Procedures

Set forth below is a brief description of Town Meeting procedures which govern the presentation, consideration and voting on matters which come before Town Meeting. It is hoped this summary will answer some questions which citizens have regarding Town Meeting, and may serve to make the Meeting run more smoothly and efficiently. While it may not answer all questions people have, it does outline what appears to the Moderator to be the more important facts and basic procedures relating to Town Meeting.

Warrant - The Warrant is the Agenda for the actions to come before Town Meeting. It constitutes official notice to the Town of the matters to be considered in general terms, and indicates the sponsoring Town Department or Agency who will present the Motion and lead the discussion under the Warrant Article. It is worth noting that Articles in the Warrant are not self executing; there needs to be a Motion presented to the Meeting with respect to action to be taken under each Article. Typically the Article will be “to see if the Town will . . . [take some action]” and the Motion will be “Moved: That the Town . . . [take the action]”. The Motion can be virtually identical with the Article or it can be somewhat more precise and specific as long as it is within the “scope” of the Article. As the Article serves the purpose of giving notice to the Town as to what is to be considered, no Motion, nor any Amendment to a Motion, can go beyond or cover matters outside of what could reasonably be considered to have been included in the Article. For example, if the Article is to see if the Town will vote to purchase a police cruiser for \$50,000, it would not be within the scope of the Article for the Motion to be to purchase a police cruiser and a fire engine for \$150,000.

The Articles in the Warrant will be taken up at the Meeting in the order in which they are printed in the Warrant unless the meeting votes to take an Article out of order. One exception to this rule relates to those Articles which are on the Consent Calendar, as to which see the discussion below. If there are two or more Articles which deal with the same or similar matters or issues, it may be desirable and appropriate for the sponsoring agency to make some general comments about a group of Articles before presenting the individual Motions under each one.

Motions - As indicated above there needs to be a Motion presented to the Town to be voted on under each Article. If it happens, as it does from time to time, that prior to Town Meeting but after the Warrant has been printed and posted the sponsor of the Article decides not to go forward with it, there must still be a Motion to dispose of the Article, the usual one being a motion to “pass over” the Article. As you come into the auditorium for the Meeting, one of the documents set out on the table to pick up will be a printed sheet of the proposed Motions to be made under each of the Articles. There may be some Articles (usually referring to by-law amendments) which state that the amendment is on file at the Town Clerk’s office. These amendments will also be included in the Motion Sheet. When the Article is called for presentation the sponsor may read the Motion as printed if it is short or may make the Motion “as printed on the Motion Sheet” if it is longer. If there are any changes or refinements to the printed Motion, these will, of course, be noted. An explanation of the proposed Action will then be made by the sponsor, some of which will be very brief and some may require more detailed explanation. My guideline is to limit the explanation to no more than ten (10) minutes and this is

usually but not always followed. There may be other Town Boards that wish to speak with respect to action proposed under an Article after which there is opportunity for general discussion and debate. Anyone wishing to make a comment or raise a question need only raise their hand and when called upon by the Moderator wait for the delivery of a portable microphone by one of the pages. There are also two standing microphones at the rear of the front section of the auditorium for the convenience of speakers. When called upon to speak please give your name and your street address and then raise your question or make your comment. Once again there is no hard and fast rule as to time but for speakers from the floor a two to three minute period should be sufficient. Amendments to a Motion can always be made, assuming they fall within the scope of the Article, as discussed above. If someone knows in advance of an Amendment they wish to make, it would be helpful to provide the text of that Amendment to the Moderator. However it is not necessary to have a carefully worked out Amendment in advance. The Moderator and Town Counsel are willing and able to help with any proposed Amendments. Citizen engagement is vital in making Town Meeting an effective form of government. Please do not hesitate to ask questions or to express opinions or concerns.

Voting - Most motions which are made at Town Meeting are adopted by majority vote, although there are a few which by reason of a statute or Town By-Law require two-thirds vote – e.g. motions to borrow or to amend the Zoning By-Laws. If there are amendments which have been made to motions, the meeting first votes on the Amendment and then on the main motion as amended, if the amendment passes, or on the main motion without the amendment, if it fails. Voting is done first by voice vote and if the Moderator is uncertain whether the motion passes (sometimes those in the minority have louder voices!) the Moderator will call for a standing vote and if it is still unclear there will be a count by tellers appointed by the Moderator. It should be noted that the Moderator’s determination of the result of the vote is final, unless seven voters stand and challenge the determination, in which event a count will be made. In accordance with a Town By-Law adopted a few years ago the same procedure is followed when a two-thirds vote is required; once again seven voters can challenge the Moderator’s determination, in which case a count will be taken by the tellers.

Procedures for Voting on the Budget - The Budget as printed in this booklet is presented by the Finance Committee and after discussion and before any votes the Moderator will go down the Budget line by line and ask if anyone wishes to “hold out” any line item for further discussion or amendment. To hold a budget item out, simply raise your hand to be recognized, then identify the budget line item number of concern. Once this process is completed the Budget, excluding the items held out will be voted on, presumably without further discussion, and we will then go back and take up each line item which has been held out for discussion and separate vote. The Moderator will typically return to the person holding out each item to begin the discussion.

Override Budget - In years when an Override Budget is being proposed by the Finance Committee, that Budget is also printed in ~~the~~ booklet and will be presented first and voted on in the manner outlined above. However, an affirmative vote on an Override Budget at Town Meeting is subject to a further affirmative vote on a specific override amount at the Town Election on the Monday following Saturday’s Town Meeting. Therefore in order not to have to

return and vote on the Non-Override Budget (also printed in the booklet) in the event the override on the ballot fails at the Monday election, the Meeting then will go through and vote on a second Non-Override Budget under the same procedures outlined above. That vote will only become operative if the override question on the ballot is defeated.

Consent Calendar - Pursuant to the Town's By-Laws the Moderator can designate certain Articles which are considered to be routine, non-controversial and/or of a minor nature which are not expected to generate any discussion or opposition to be placed on the Consent Calendar. There will be distributed at the Meeting a separate Consent Calendar sheet which will list the Articles that have been put on the Consent Calendar and the Motions under those Articles. When the Meeting reaches the first of the Articles that are on the Consent Calendar the entire Calendar (even though the Articles may not be consecutive) will be considered. The Moderator will first go down the list of Articles on the Consent Calendar and any individual voter can remove an Article from the Consent Calendar by simply calling out the Article upon being recognized by the Moderator, in which event it will be taken up in the normal manner in its regular sequence on the Warrant. The motions under the Articles remaining on the Consent Calendar will be adopted in a single vote, presumably unanimous, which will incorporate the votes under each of the Articles as printed on the Consent Calendar. This procedure speeds up and expedites the conduct of the business of the Meeting by not requiring individual presentation and discussion of those Articles which are deemed to qualify for Consent Calendar treatment.