

## 1/11/2020 Richard Howe

### **Initial Thoughts "After attending last week's meeting, I wanted to share a few thoughts with the committee.**

By the time Massachusetts towns grow to populations above 30,000, most have shifted from open town meetings to representative town meetings or town/city councils as their legislative bodies. Of the 55 Massachusetts communities with more than 30,000 residents only three, including Andover (the largest), still have open town meetings; 12 towns have representative town meetings; and 40 communities have city or town councils with professional managers and/or elected mayors. Nationally, according to the International City Management Association, the council-manager structure is the most common form of government. It is utilized in nearly 60% of municipalities across the country and is especially popular in communities with populations over 10,000. Another 34% have a mayor council form, including many which appoint a manager to run daily operations. Fewer than five percent of local governments have town meetings; these are mostly in smaller communities in New England. When your committee considers other local government structures, I hope you will look beyond those prevalent in just our corner of the country.

An effective municipal government should encourage public participation, should be transparent about its actions by sharing information publicly, and should make good decisions based on facts, research, and well-reasoned debate. It should represent all segments of the community and be open, accountable, and efficient. As the legislative body responsible for approving the annual budget, authorizing major projects, and holding our elected officials accountable, our current open town meeting no longer meets our town's needs. To illustrate:

**Public Participation** - In recent years, town meeting has had only 2-4 sessions each spring, with fall meetings increasingly rare. By comparison, Reading (a smaller town than Andover) has a representative town meeting with 192 members elected by precinct that meets in spring and fall for 6-8 sessions each year. Reading also permits brief statements from the public on each article.

**Representation** - Andover town meetings are generally attended by 200-500 residents, or less than two percent of our more than 24,000 registered voters. At most town meetings, a majority of those attending are considerably older than the average voter. When there is a larger turnout at Andover town meeting, it is invariably due to a particular controversy, such as a planned motion to cut the school budget, a possible zoning change, or anything relating to dogs. Citizens interested in only those issues will often come with their minds already made up and leave shortly after voting on those particular articles.

**Transparency** - The quality and quantity of information provided to the public and to town meeting is quite limited and often poorly presented. Better, more current advance information, more detailed town meeting presentations, better use of technology, making more information available on the town website, and reaching out to the press more frequently would all create better transparency.

**Discussion and Decision-Making** - When debate does occur at our town meeting, it is often repetitive and focused on opinions, rather than the facts and rationale presented by our elected and appointed officials. A smaller legislative body representing all neighborhoods and segments of Andover's population might allow better information in advance of meetings and more productive discussions and debate among elected representatives. Over time, these representatives might develop a deeper understanding of municipal budgets and other complex issues.

**Efficiency** - While electing members of a representative town meeting or town council might add some expense to current town elections, at least part of it might be offset by savings from not printing and delivering a copy of the Finance Committee Report to every household. Instead, a full warrant report could be posted on the town's website, and all residents notified by email or postcard that it is available for their viewing. Moreover, a representative town meeting or town council meeting can usually be held more promptly than an open town meeting. This year, for example, holding the necessary town meeting delayed road repairs funded by Columbia Gas, with some being put off until next spring.

Andover has grown and changed considerably since the last Town Government Review Committee more than 17 years ago. Voters are used to electing representatives for Congress and the state legislature. It is time for us to do the same thing for our local government. Our town deserves a more effective, efficient legislative body as part of an updated town government structure."