

Town Governance Study Committee Public Input

Ed Anson

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More perspectives make for better decisions

My thanks to the committee for your diligence and the effort you have put into researching the town governance question. The breadth and depth of your inquiry is truly remarkable and appreciated.

That said, there are one or two more things I hope you will consider.

I moved to Andover in 1980, and have since voted in at least forty town meetings. Although there is always room for improvement, I strongly believe that open town meeting is still the best way to govern the town. When considering how the town will make important decisions, it is important to look not only at who makes the decisions, but also at the decision-making process.

For any important issue, there are typically many perspectives or points of view. Judging by typical attendance at Town Meeting, it would appear that 98% of those perspectives have in common: "It doesn't matter much to me. Let someone else decide." That's a valid perspective and it should be honored. There may be some things that make it difficult for some people to attend, but it is worth noting that attendance seems to become possible for many more people when an issue on the warrant is important to them.

Within the 500 or so people who do make it to the meeting, there may be at least 500 different perspectives. I personally often arrive at the meeting with at least two conflicting opinions of my own on one or more issues. I rely on the debate at the meeting to help me decide how to vote. Other times, I arrive at the meeting prepared to vote one way, and become persuaded by the debate to change my mind. I suspect I'm not unique in that regard. The important thing is that many different perspectives are focused on an issue, and at least some of the differences are openly discussed. It is important that those who vote participate in that discussion. In a town council form of government, the most important decisions are made from a small number of perspectives, and those perspectives are typically far less diverse than what we find at a town meeting. For an issue that matters to me, given a choice between a decision made by 500 strangers or a decision by 9 strangers, I feel more comfortable with the 500.

In Andover we are blessed by expert opinions from the Select Board, the School Committee and the Finance Committee, as well as from the various professionals employed by the Town. Without them it would be impossible for Town Meeting to make good decisions. Indeed, the vast majority of decisions simply ratify the recommendations of those advisors. If that were not the case, we would need to replace those advisors! But occasionally the voters make a different decision from what is recommended. It is in exactly those cases that we see the most meaningful difference between a town council and Town Meeting. I would suggest looking into those (thankfully rare) cases, to examine the dynamic of each decision and the effect of different perspectives on the outcome. In my experience, and in my opinion, the broader perspective usually gives a better result for the town.

Before I moved to Andover, I lived in a town with an elected town council. I remember attending a hearing over a proposal to change the zoning of a particular piece of land from open space (“park”) to residential. This was because a developer wanted to put up a bunch of condos. The hearing was well attended. Several citizens spoke — all of them opposed to the change. The change was approved by the council.

And now, just a few side points:

— On electronic voting: I am concerned about the potential for error — intentional or otherwise. The electronic voting devices that have been proposed so far were not designed for voting, and are not even close to being reliable or secure enough for the purpose. I would not feel comfortable with electronic voting. Besides, standing counts provide a welcome chance to get out of my seat for a few minutes.

— On combining related articles: I think that’s a excellent idea. It would not only expedite discussion, but would improve the quality of the discussion. I think it is unfortunate that our current Moderator does not permit even the mention of related articles during debate — even when the mention is relevant to the article under discussion.

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