

Andover Town Governance Study Committee Comments of Joel Blumstein

Thank you to the members of the Town Governance Study Committee for the significant time and great attention you have devoted to your mission. It is much appreciated. I respectfully offer the following observations and recommendations.

It appears that much of the focus of the Committee has been on whether Open Town Meeting has successfully served our Town and whether there has been a groundswell of support for moving to a different form of government. On the latter issue, I agree with the Committee that there does not appear to be any great groundswell of support for changing our form of government. As to whether Andover has been successfully served by Open Town Meeting, I do not take quite as positive a view as the Study Committee appears to have taken. I see it as more mixed.

On the one hand, Andover remains a thriving community where people want to live, work, educate their children, and enjoy the amenities of our downtown and recreational areas. What role Open Town Meeting has played in this success is hard to say but, generally speaking, it certainly has not been an obstacle to this success. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the concept of two percent of the residents – our average Town Meeting attendance – making decisions for the other 98% is unsettling. Also, there have been numerous instances where projects have either been rejected or significantly delayed by Town Meeting which were, at least in my opinion, in the best long-term interests of the Town as a whole. And while perhaps more minor, there are the inherent downsides of Open Town Meeting where comments and questions often are dominated by a small number of vocal residents, where minor amendments are offered and debated at length, and where confusion runs rampant about those amendments and what a pro or con vote means.

However, I would like to suggest that whether Open Town Meeting has served us well in the past and whether there is strong public support for changing our form of government are the wrong questions. The key question, in my view, is whether **looking forward**, Open Town Meeting will remain the best form of government for Andover's future success. Andover is growing and the issues we confront are becoming more complex. Also, our population is becoming more diverse – racially, ethnically, economically, by religion and by language. All this points towards the importance of seriously considering a form of government – most likely the Town Manager/Town Council form – that is more nimble, more able to address complex issues in a timely manner, and more representative of the whole population.

A perfect example of the importance of being able to address complex issues in a timely manner is the Town Manager's current proposal for issuing a pension obligation bond to address the Town's significant unfunded pension liability. I believe the proposal is an excellent one and can be a key component of securing Andover's future economic stability. However, the proposal is somewhat difficult to grasp, even for those of us fairly immersed in municipal finance, and it will be particularly so for those less familiar with municipal finance and who have not studied the proposal in detail before voting on it. It also is a time-sensitive one in that it takes advantage of the currently available low borrowing rates. Any delay by Town Meeting in approving the proposal, either for failure to fully understand it or for any other reason, might well permanently derail it and force the Town into other options which would be more costly or which might negatively impact Town services.

With respect to the importance of having a form of government which is representative of our growing and increasingly heterogeneous community, many have tried to rationalize why it is okay that the 2% of us who regularly attend Town Meeting are making decisions for the other 98% who do not attend. While some who do not attend may be content to have others make the decisions for them, for others the reasons for not attending are much more varied and complex. Also, while an argument may have been credible in the past - when Andover's population was smaller and more homogenous - that those who did attend were relatively representative of the whole population, I do not think that argument is any longer supportable and certainly not when looking forward and considering Andover's increasing size and changing demographics.

For these reasons, I believe that the Town Manager/Town Council form of government should be considered seriously by the Study Committee. While my bias, at this point, is towards the Town Manager/Town Council form of government, I must acknowledge my primary outstanding concern which is whether we would be successful in having people run for and serve on the Town Council who are representative of their constituents and who would do the work necessary to fully understand the pros and cons of the various issues they will face. I hope that the Study Committee will examine this issue.

Finally, even though the Committee has made clear its preference for retaining Open Town Meeting, I want to encourage the Study Committee to maintain an open mind and to continue its outreach efforts with a particular emphasis on **educating** the public about the possible forms of government which Andover could adopt and **listening** to as many people as possible about what they want from their government, all with an eye towards how best to meet these needs moving forward. I know that the Committee has made significant efforts in this regard and that getting meaningful public input is difficult in any circumstance and particularly so during a pandemic. However, despite these efforts, I believe most people in Town are not aware of the important work of this Committee nor do they have much sense of the alternative forms of government available. I recommend reaching out directly to and attempting to meet with the various organizations in Town who have a stake in how Andover is governed – civic organizations, business groups, advocacy/political organizations, senior citizen groups, parent/teacher associations, and charitable/religious organizations, to name just a few.

Once the work of this committee is completed, it is highly unlikely that another similar committee will be convened until many years into the future. That is why I encourage you to take your time to educate and listen to the public and to take the long view as to what form of government will best serve Andover for the next 10 or 20 years.

Thanks, and good luck.

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