

August 17, 2020

Austin Simko  
Town Clerk  
36 Bartlet Street  
Andover, MA 01810

Dear Mr. Simko:

We are writing to express our views on whether Andover should retain Open Town Meeting. We are strongly in favor of doing so.

We have lived in Andover for more than 45 years. During that time, one or both of us has attended all but a handful of Town Meetings, and we have voted in almost every election. On the hundreds of warrant articles that have come before Town Meeting in those decades, we have often voted with the majority, but sometimes found ourselves in the minority. Even as Andover's population and budget have grown, never have we flagged in our enthusiastic support for Town Meeting. Put another way, never once have we concluded that the legislative powers of Andover town government would more wisely be entrusted to a small group of elected officials than to the hundreds of townspeople who attend Town Meeting.

We grew up in municipalities outside of New England governed by systems more like those that have been proposed as alternatives to open town meeting. By and large, those systems did not give rise to unbridled civic pride. The power of incumbency can calcify the responsiveness of a local council no less than any other legislative body, and its members can become too cozy with developers, special interests, or other insiders. The rose-tinted concept that a small, elected municipal council will somehow inexorably be well-informed, impartial, unencumbered by special-interest influence, smart, or even sensitive to the community's needs is a proposition easily disproved. Open a newspaper.

In stark contrast to the municipal governments we had experienced before coming to Andover, open Town Meeting allows every registered voter to become a member of the Town's legislative body – to listen, to speak up, and to vote – on every legislative matter facing the Town. It only takes ten voters to put a matter on the legislative agenda themselves. It is the purest form of democracy. That is a treasure that should not be surrendered lightly.

To be sure, it takes less time to vote for someone else to make legislative decisions instead of you. Then you won't have to read the Finance Committee Report, become informed about issues you care about, or show up at Town Meeting to speak out and cast your vote. But what exactly are you gaining, and what are you sacrificing, by giving your legislative seat away to someone else? Convenience? Without Town Meeting to put the issues together in a single agenda, good luck combing through on-line agendas to discover what issues are up for a vote, then tracking down your elected representative to lobby him or her, perhaps standing in line behind the special interest lobbyist who contributed a lot more money to their campaign. If you care about one issue, several, or the whole of Town governance, attending Town Meeting is the most efficient and direct way to be counted. If you don't, you can be pretty confident in the collective wisdom of several hundred of your fellow townspeople.

That really is at the heart of why we should retain open town meeting. It works well in Andover. And that is no accident. We have witnessed, over the last 45 years, not just the traditions and decorum but also the culture and civic pride that inform Andover's Town Meeting. It is a culture of civic participation passed from generation to generation. Town meeting, like democracy itself, is not the most efficient form of government, nor does it just happen. No other form of government allows or demands as much direct citizen participation. It takes effort, and through the years Andover citizens have volunteered countless hours – serving on boards, task forces, commissions, and committees like this one – to make our system work. Their recommendations for adoption by the Town's legislative body are not only vetted by other committees, and subjected to public comment. Those recommendations must ultimately be tested by the scrutiny of hundreds of participants at Town Meeting. Open Town Meeting forces officials to hone, explain, and be prepared to defend their proposals. Not surprisingly, after passing through numerous prior reviews, even complex matters are often approved with little controversy. But time after time, debate at Town Meeting has revealed fundamental flaws in proposals, requiring that they be revamped.

On some significant occasions – for example, the initial draft of a water contract with North Reading, and a blanket authorization to sell the Old Town Yard before any work had been done on design guidelines or an RFP - Town Meeting has rejected the recommendation of the Select Board. More often than not, in our view, Town Meeting has been wise to do so, and Town Meeting's vote has better reflected the will of the citizenry. Had Andover been governed by a Town Council on these occasions, there's every reason to think that the initial ill-advised proposals would have been adopted. The Town would not have been better off.

We know that not everyone can attend Town meeting. We, too, have gone through periods of our lives when work or family obligations have kept one or the other of us away. And not everyone has the patience required. We would encourage everyone to go when you can. And, yes, go even if you just want to vote on a single issue you care deeply about. There's nothing wrong with that – just like there's nothing wrong with voting for only one candidate or one proposition on the ballot. If a large number of people turn out for Town Meeting because they are passionate about a single issue, why is that more inimical to democracy than those same people turning out to vote for or lobby members of a town council because they care about one issue more than another? And if we are to adopt a darker view of the effect of money on politics, it is probably easier for a developer or other special interest to influence a low-turnout election than it is to sway hundreds of voters in an open town meeting.

In sum, we think open town meeting is a priceless asset to the Town of Andover. Can it be improved? Undoubtedly. And as with other volunteer task forces and study committees on which we have served over the years, we are confident that the Town Governance Study Committee can and will fashion recommendations that – once adopted by Town Meeting – will serve Andover well.

Respectfully,

Rebecca Backman  
Stephen Cotton  
19 Pomeroy Rd.