

Kevin Coffey

2/3/2021

Kevin Coffey Input to TGSC Request

Cast a Wider Net!

To the Andover Town Governance Study Committee:

Thank you again for all of the work, information gathering, and information sharing done thus far on this important topic, and for this opportunity to provide additional feedback. Rather than write a letter restating the inputs given in three public sessions attended, summarized here are the main points I believe still require attention.

1. Publicity and engagement. Whether and how to change our form of town government is an awfully important issue, impacting all residents and very likely shaping the Town for decades ahead. Two observations immediately flow from this, (a) there was—and remains—an obligation for the Town and Committee to reach far to notify, inform, and solicit input from all resident voters, and (b) to consider carefully how changes in lifestyle, preferences, and technology have changed and are likely to continue to change the most effective way of governing the Town in the years ahead.

a. In talking to fellow residents about this for the last few weeks, I have been shocked to learn how many people have heard absolutely nothing about the town governance question or study committee. Just yesterday, I met and raised the topic with two neighbor families, one who has lived in Andover for more than twenty years, is a regular reader of the Andover Townsman, and is connected to other groups in town including a church group, and the second who has lived in Andover for only three years but has had two children in Andover schools and is very astute with electronic communications of all kinds, those being at the heart of his profession. Both neighbors are quite interested in town government and issues and were happy to finally learn of the town governance effort. How is it that these people were left unaware of the Town Governance Study Committee's existence, charter, and work? Was the effort to publicize well and widely enough that the output can be considered truly representative and valid?

I remained concerned that the Committee is poised to wind down their work without ever having reached the great majority of Andover residents eligible to vote on Town matters and interested in doing so. It seems as if most participants in the Study effort were part of the very small minority of Andover insiders that are well-informed and regularly participate in Town Government in one way or another. Why, for example, was there not a flyer announcing the Committee's work included with any of the past five or six property tax bills mailed, which reach every Andover property owner and are being sent already, anyway?

b. The last time the Town made a formal form of government study was in 2002. That concluded that, while some minor adjustments to the running of Town Meeting were warranted, that Town Meeting should remain the Andover method of governance. At that time, 2002, the iPhone was still five and Android phones six years away. Though Yahoo! Mail appeared in 1997, the now-ubiquitous Gmail only started beta testing in 2004. None of the social media tools so widely used today existed in 2002. In short, the ways people communicated the last time this issue was studied were by telephone, in writing, and in person. Not today.

Now, even those of us with missing or gray hair quite regularly rely on various forms of electronic communication to keep in touch, stay informed, and share opinions both personally and professionally. The next generation, our children—mine are 34 and 32 years—are more mobile, more asynchronous, generally more worldly and connected, and apt to conduct even more of their personal and professional business remotely and electronically. Governing their lives, work, and towns is unlikely to be done in inflexible or long-duration meetings.

Town Meeting as we have known or imagined it to date is simply too rigid and exclusive to fairly represent the collective will of residents for the next twenty years. It outright prevents residents unable to spend multiple long evenings in most years seated with a few hundred others in a large room. Whether for out-of-town business obligations, family care needs, illness, or a need to be at work on second shift, residents that cannot—or choose not to—sit through Town Meeting should not be denied their opportunity to vote on important issues. Any citizen should be able to conveniently become informed, express opinion, and ultimately vote. We have plenty of possibilities for safely enabling this and we should have the courage and will to make the change.

2. Out of the box. The Committee seems to have narrowed fairly early the forms of government to spend any serious time considering down to four, all types already in place in other Massachusetts towns. More recently, while disclosing their tentative conclusion that Town Meeting should remain our form of government, consideration was further narrowed to two, one being Town Meeting, and a “capstone advocacy exercise” is scheduled as a bake-off between those two. This seems aimed to reach a recommendation by a certain date rather than really to find the best alternative. There should be more genuine reach for and study of other inputs and examples that might serve Andover better.

A possibility that appeals greatly to me but has gotten little attention in Committee materials is a separate legal New Hampshire form of town meeting known as SB2, named after the Senate bill authorizing this form of government. SB2 breaks town meeting into two steps, a Deliberative Session and Election Day. In the Deliberative Session, all warrant articles are considered with opportunities for explanation, discussion, and amendment of each article. The conclusion of each article will result in voting to either add the article to the ballot for voting on Election Day in its original form or as amended in this session. When the Deliberative Session is adjourned, the final language of each article is fixed, but no decision as to whether or not any article is passed is made. On Election Day, voters mark “yes” or “no” on each warrant article in the voting booths with the final outcome of each article being decided.

SB2 retains some of the best attributes of town meeting, direct discourse to refine and resolve proposals, and, at the same time, allows much wider voting participation even for those unable to attend a particular meeting on a particular day. Records and results of the Deliberative Session can be both streamed in real time and archived for easy reference during the period before Election Day. Deciding articles by ballot on Election Day represents little additional expense since Election Day happens in any case and leaves open the possibility for residents to vote in the usual manner at their polling place, or to vote early or via absentee ballot, if necessary. Decision security is maintained just as for all elections. Should SB2 or other more creative alternative not at least be seriously considered?

To any resident wishing to conveniently continue discussion of Andover town governance, with opportunity to speak, question, and productively debate, please consider joining a private Google Group established for exactly this purpose. Only an email address is necessary, and level of participation is entirely a personal choice. For more information, please feel free to contact me via kevin@andovergovernance.org or (978) 704-1566.

The diligent effort made by the Committee thus far must be commended and the foundation of information they have built is valuable. Still, both engagement and consideration require additional work and we should not allow an arbitrarily chosen deadline to short-circuit the process. Cast a wider net!

Regards,

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Contact Me The Committee May Contact Me to Discuss my Input